

# RANGVARTĀ

News Bulletin of the Natya Shodh Sansthan, Calcutta

NUMBER 4 APRIL 1986

The Jatra season in West Bengal is coming to a close. Norwesters and rains have already begun interfering with the schedules. Drawing massive audiences, often running into ten thousand or even more, performed under *shāmiānās* on makeshift platforms, it still remains the most popular performative tradition in this State. The experimental, non-professional theatre that calls itself 'the group theatre' in this State has never quite reached the spread and mobility and natural acceptance that the Jatra has enjoyed for several decades. In a recent article in *Sangeet Natak*, a periodical published by the Sangeet Natak Akademi, Rudra Prasad Sengupta, one of the leading figures of the New Theatre in West Bengal, describes the Jatra as 'at best a hybrid—an unholy mixture of urban pollution and what Matthew Arnold calls the "provincial"'. It is not the cup of tea for a man with modern sensibilities; even an orthodox traditionalist fails to identify its folk roots. Yet when the concert starts to play in the presence of a ten-thousand-strong audience, nostalgia does creep into the Bengali soul and one wonders what has gone wrong. Has the process of lumpenization of society at large finally overtaken a folk form also? What such criticism lacks is a sense of history; for the Jatra has long lost its folk character and found in its stead a fascinating popular mix of the urban and the folk, stronger and more expressive and more powerfully moving than

several folk conventions that have degenerated into lifeless ritual and dull orthodoxy. Sengupta as an experimentalist has often produced hybrid works, and quite strangely now harps on the sanctity of folk authenticity and finds hybridism the worst sin. Theatre at its best, from the Elizabethans to Dario Fo, has always taken pride in its hybridism. In its life and death commitment to immediate communication, theatre has always been quite unashamed in its borrowings and combinations. A theatre that does not dare break out of cults and conventions would naturally shy away from the sheer power of a form like the Jatra which holds on to its audience by the sheer virtue of its style, a style that runs through its rich acting code. Over the years the Jatra has shown excellent resilience in its capacity to accommodate acting styles. As I watched two performances by the well known Natta Company recently, in a village and a small town, I admired the Jatra's emotional hold on its audience, its rejection of the old familiar stereotypes for a far richer range of characterization and typology, and the sheer professional mastery of skills in its commingling of the verbal and the musical, the prose and the rhythm of performance. A 'group theatre' fast losing its audience and looking for support from the media for survival and a lift in the eyes of the audience, should learn to be humble enough to watch and study and seek what makes the Jatra go - rather than run down those wonderful

performers and their fascinated audiences. As we drove to the remote village, we could see on the way a veritable procession of men, women and children walking or on flat carts plodding for miles to the performance, and then responding to the happening with the reverence that art has always demanded. They were no fools or lumpens, they were our people, and they responded to the gutsy theatre that defined the performance. The Jatra could do with better texts, and that is a failing that it shares with all those folk traditions that are now being idealized out of all proportion. The ties that bind the Jatra to its audience should serve to support and sustain and use a richer text. The New Theatre in West Bengal, equally poor in texts, has, however, no right to look down upon the Jatra on that score.

S. B.

## SANSTHAN RESOURCES

### Girishchandra Ghosh : Actor

A fledgling Bengali theatre attained maturity through the plays of Girishchandra Ghosh. But Girishchandra had entered the theatre not as a playwright, but as an actor – at the age of twenty-three, in a production of *Sharmishthā* by an amateur Jatra company at Baghbazar. Soon after that first stint he became a part of the story of the Bengali theatre with his performance as Bhimsingh in the National Theatre production of *Krishnakumāri*.

Girishchandra was compelled to write plays because the Bengali theatre needed a steady supply of plays, and a rich body of plays had not yet grown up. But in the theatre of the times Girishchandra the playwright had a formidable rival in Girishchandra the actor. According to Apareshchandra Mukherjee, perhaps the most dependable chronicler of the theatre of the period, 'it was only his acting genius that had developed' in the National Theatre phase.

Later on, he would come to sustain the Bengali theatre both as playwright and actor.

For a glimpse of his acting style one can turn to Hemendrakumar Roy: 'When Girishchandra entered the stage in the last scene of *Pratfulla*, speaking the line 'Āmar sājano bāgān shukiye gelo' ('my lovingly nurtured orchard's all dried up now'), in poignant tones and crossed the stage from one end to another and stood stunned. I



Girishchandra Ghosh

don't think there would be anyone who wouldn't break into tears at the sight of his looks. At that point one would have the feeling that it was not Girishchandra in flesh but a stone figure that stood there on the stage, with its tearless eyes loaded with indescribable anguish.' (*Nāchghar*, vol. 1, no. 23, 1331 Bangabda).

Apareshchandra Mukherjee offers his account of the same scene: 'The words as they were spoken held within them a secret flow of lamentation. The tone was dry and piercing, the ocean of pity was dried up, with only the burning sands lying round,

from which one couldn't wring out a single drop of water any longer. One who hasn't seen Girishchandra as Jogesh will never know how the heart can hold the flow of pity secret under pitilessness.' (*Rāṅgālay Trish Batsar*).

Girishchandra's last stage role was as Karunamoy in *Balidān*. Apareshchandra Mukherjee compares the performances of Girishchandra and Ardhendushekhar Mustafi as Karunamoy before the deadbody of his daughter Hiranmoyee, before describing the former: 'There were no tears in his eyes. All the juices of the body seemed to have dried up, the flow of the blood was congealed, the clouds had thickened over the dead eyes, the voice was dry, broken, profound. A cry welled up from the depths of the spectator's heart at the sight of this man. A man they had never known came from where they never knew like a blast and shattered everything for them in a trice. Girishchandra's Karunamoy haunted his spectators. Long after the performance, the impact of this Karunamoy kept the spectator under a spell, on the street, at the door of his house, in his dark bedroom, at dinnertime, in his sleep, in his very dreams, for two or three days after the performance.' For Apareshchandra, Girishchandra's Karunamoy was 'like a tree hit by a lightning, shorn of its leaves and flowers, like a charred log of wood.' (*Rāṅgālay Trish Batsar*).

Girishchandra had developed a silent expression for all the profounder human feelings, the pains, the losses, the joys and the passions. Even as Aurangzeb, a historical and political character (in the play *Chhatrapati Shivaji*), Girishchandra would be using the same silent intensity. With a reticent acting style, Girishchandra had touched the comic only twice in his acting career—in *Chaitanyaleela* and *Chandra-shekhar*.

Girishchandra had an excellent voice. According to Hemendrakumar Roy, 'He had mastered the art of voice projection to such

a point that he could reach the last row of the gallery at ease even when he spoke casually' (*Nāchghar*, no. 23, 1331 Bangabda). His voice projection was primarily dependant on the musicality that he brought into his speaking. The two distinct styles of speaking and acting in the Bengali theatre of the time can be described as the musical or 'tuneful' and the unmusical or 'tuneless.' Girishchandra was the most important figure in the former style, and Ardhendushekhar led in the latter.

Girishchandra added a little bit of tune to the everyday tones of speech to bring an aesthetic quality to his acting. *Nāchghar* (vol. 1, no. 12) wrote: 'Girishchandra modulated his tonality in accordance with the needs of the meaning of the words, and never limited himself to a uniform tunefulness.' Amritlal Mitra was perhaps his closest follower among his successors, in an intelligent absorption of this tuneful style. Later still, Sisirkumar Bhadury would illustrate this style in all its glory. The tunefulness evident in Sombhu Mitra in post-Independence Bengali theatre is considerably Tagorean, but at its source it probably derives from the tradition of Girishchandra.

Girishchandra had appeared in about forty roles in thirty-four plays, between 1867 and 1911, for almost half a century, though intermittently. Beginning at the National Theatre, he had gone on to provide artistic leadership at almost all the theatres of his time—Star, Emerald, Minerva and Classic—as playwright, actor, stage designer, and teacher of acting. Even if one does not immediately accept at face value Dwijendralal Roy's eulogy—'the acting achievement that Girishchandra brought to his performance as Jogesh and Karunamoy was in no way inferior to the acting of Irving'—one would have to admit that without the contributions of Girishchandra as an actor in the early phase of Bengali theatre, the Bengali theatre as a whole would have remained artistically poorer.

The clippings from contemporary reviews and evaluations gathered in the Girishchandra file at the Natya Shodh Sansthan archives provide glimpses of this inadequately documented area of Girishchandra's achievement.

DURGA DUTTA

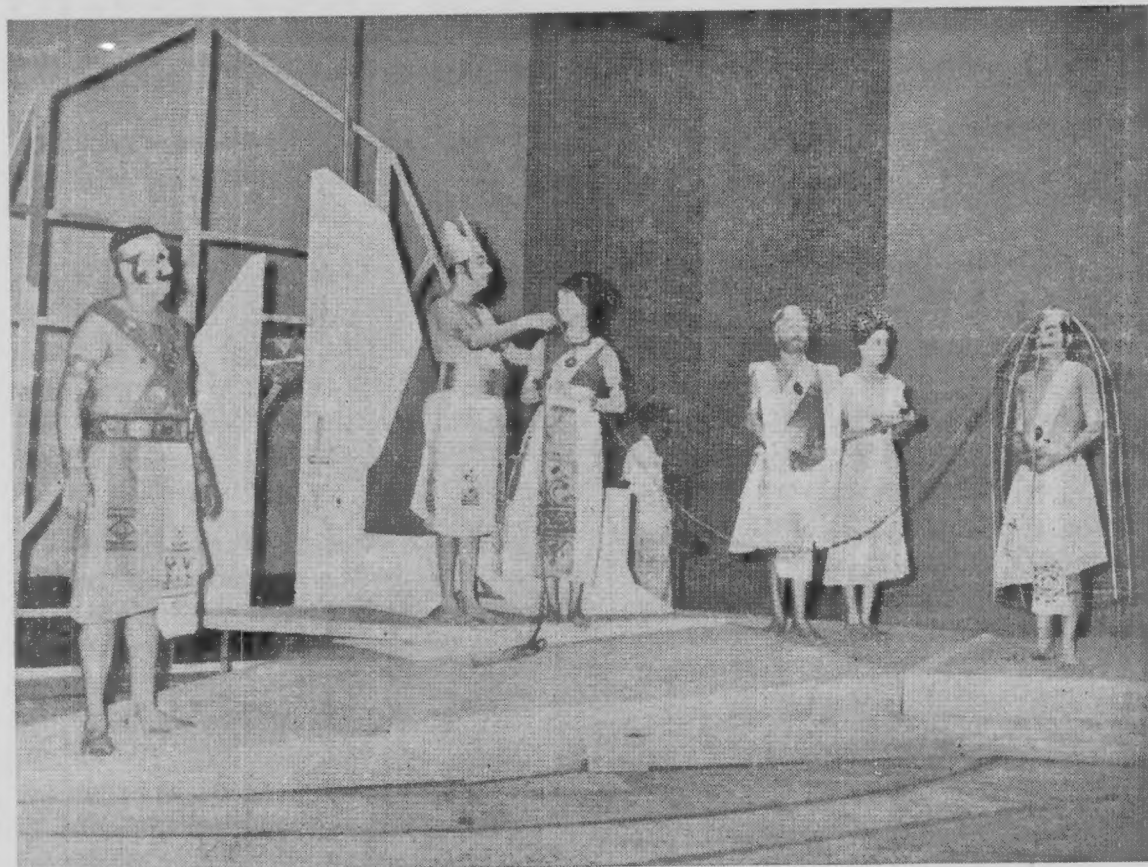
## THEATRE INSIGHT

### Shuturmurg : A Case Study In Stagecraft

*Shuturmurg* (The Ostrich), written by Gyan-dev Agnihotri and produced by Anamika, Calcutta (first performance 19 July 1967) is the story of a strange land ruled by a frivolous, impractical and irresponsible king. When faced with the naked truth of poverty and hunger, sorrow and suffering, he turns his face away from reality and delves deep into his illusory make-believe world. Surrounded

by sycophants, he pays no heed to the needs of his subjects. His unscrupulous and inept ministers, the Annamantri (Food Minister), Bhashanmantri (Minister for speeches) and Rakshāmantri (Defence Minister) make the situation worse. Virodhilar who represents the Opposition, and Mamuliram the representative of the common people in the King's court, are prototypes of the present day politicians ready to sacrifice the interests of the people for personal gain. The poor commoners, fatigued and hungry, can only whisper : *Inquilab Zindabad* (Long live the revolution).

To quote Khaled Chowdhury who had designed the set and costumes for the Anamika production : 'From the very first story session with Shyamanand Jalan, the director of the play, it was clear to me that the play was allegorical. And while I designed the set the parallel between the King

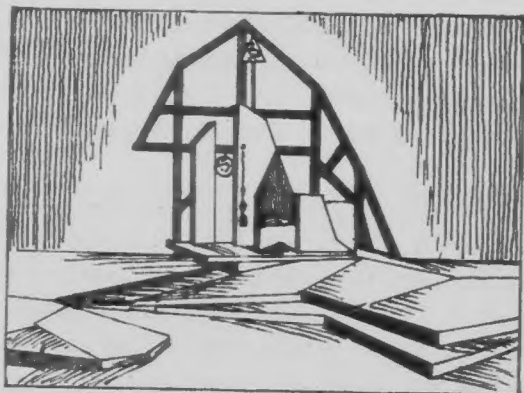


A Scene from *Shuturmurg*. Notice the set and the costumes



and the ostrich became quite evident. Again, as the ostrich is a bird of the desert, the stage-design demanded a desert setting. Another important fact stood out prominently; the story of the play dealt with contemporary problems; in some form or other, we, the twentieth century people, have had an experience of it.

The ultimate stage design carried Egyptian/Mesopotamian associations. In the centre there stood a large wooden structural form of an ostrich with its neck bent down and face hidden under the sand. This served as a backdrop as well as a symbolic defence for the country against its enemy. In front



Khaled Chowdhuri's sketch of the set design of this stood another smaller structure with a throne fixed on it. This structure with the throne was also shaped like an ostrich in a similar hiding position but it did not have the contours of the former structure. The throne was covered with ox-blood red velvet. This colour was chosen on purpose to establish the boorish character of the king and his insensitive attitude towards his suffering subjects. Moreover, the colour easily attracted the audience towards the ruler of the country. Behind the throne a pole stood out with a small figure of a running ostrich on its top. In the very early phase of the rehearsals this bird was made to chuckle every time it heard *Satyameva Jayate*, but it was later rejected for the comic effect it created which marred the *rasa* of the play.

Beneath the throne, wavy wooden planks were painted yellow and sprinkled with silicon pigments to look like sand-dunes. For the easy movement of the performers, steps were made in the sand-dunes, but, according to Khaled Chowdhury, 'it would have been visually far more interesting and authentic if the steps could have been replaced by natural slopes.'

In the course of the play the King, unwilling to accept the distressing condition of the country, wishes to see not a dead man but a 'dying man' (*marte huye admi*) who could give him first-hand information regarding the suffering of the people. At his instruction, a dying man is brought to him, but *Inquilab Zindabad* is all that can be made out from his gibberish. The appearance of a dying man representing in the grossest visual terms his hunger, suffering, and skeletal figure was deliberately conceived to create a marked discord against the unreal world that the King imagines to be real.

Virodhilal, the leader of the Opposition, is bought off by the King through bribes and subtly renamed 'Subodhilal' (the sensible one) at an oath-taking ceremony where his head and chest are straitjacketed in a golden cage replacing his previous head-gear with jutting horns. Even his dress in gaudy green and red, signifying protest and vigour, becomes subdued in the mellowed blue and white of a tamed man. Mamuliram's grey costume, with his belt and ornaments made of rope symbolizing bondage, becomes symbolic of the common man. The Minister of Broadcasting carries a bugle as part of his costume which easily goes with his profession of propagation. As a general principle, the costumes and stage decor were given an Eastern overtone, to bring it closer to the experience of the audience. Linearity was emphasized in the design to underline the socio-political satire.

ANJANA GUHA CHATTERJEE

## THEATRE NEWS

### CALCUTTA

An exhibition on the evolution of Bengali drama and theatre was held at Nandan from 27 February to 2 April as part of the State Drama Festival organized by the Ministry of Information and Cultural Affairs, Government of West Bengal.

In its limited scope, the exhibition tried to cover the entire history of Bengali theatre from its origin on 27 November 1795 with the staging of Richard Paul Jodrell's *The Disguise* in a Bengali adaptation, *Kālpānik Sangbadal*, translated by Lebedeff, under the guidance of Goloknath Das at the Bengali Theatre (25 Doomtala Lane, Calcutta) to the productions of the 'group theatre' in Calcutta. The publication of *Ātmatatva-kaumudi* (1822), the first Bengali play in print, the birth of the National Theatre (1872), the implementation of the Dramatic Performance Act (1876), the introduction of the revolving stage at Rangmahal (1933), the formation of IPTA (1943), and the revolutionary staging of *Navānna* (1944) were highlighted as remarkable landmarks.

A unique feature of the exhibition was a list of plays inspired by Dinabandhu Mitra's *Nildarpan* (1860). Among the many *Darpan* plays only two were staged, namely, *Sākshat Darpan* (written 1871, staged 24.4.1875 at Great National Theatre), and *Kerāni Darpan* (written 1874, staged 7.1.1874 at National Theatre, and on 10.10.1874 at Bengali Theatre). *Chā-Kar-Darpan* (written 1874), another *Darpan* play, though not staged then, aroused immense interest when in 1979 a theatre group staged it in Calcutta. A xerox copy of the map tracing the first British playhouse in Calcutta, drawn by the East India Company's Survey Superintendent, Lt. Col. Wills, and another of a page of *Sangbād Prabhākar* (4 August 1858) covering the first production of *Ratnābali* were

among other attractions of the exhibition. Photographs of eighteen different expressions of Girishchandra Ghosh illustrated the strength of the realistic acting tradition in the early phase of Bengali theatre.

Besides the display of several production stills from the past and the present, the texts of plays and theoretical works, there was also a good collection of xerox copies of cover-pages of theatre magazines in Bengali.

### BOMBAY

The National Centre for Performing Arts (N. C. P. A.) celebrated the seventy-fifth anniversary of the musical play *Sangeet Maan Apmaan* (playwright: K. P. Khadilkar, first performance 12 March 1911) with a programme of *Songs of Maan Apmaan* on 13 March 1986 at the Tata Theatre, Bombay, with P. L. Deshpande and Asoke Ranade as commentators.

A bunch of 104 new Marathi books have entered into the collection of the Sansthan's library. The books include drama criticism, memoirs of personalities of the theatre world and scripts of famous Marathi plays.

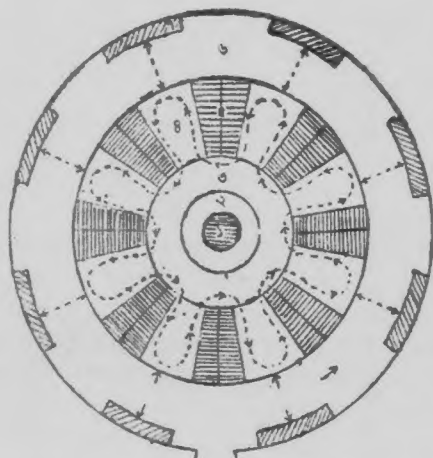
## THEATRE REPORT

### The Bare-Saharia or Assam

'Bare-Sahariya' or 'Of Twelve Cities' or 'Of Many Villages'. This Bhaona festival held once in every five years in the village Khekasundar in the Shonitpur district, 225 km from Guwahati, the capital of Assam, is a very special kind of occasion. In the Bhaona, the performance opens with the Manikot in which the *Shreemadbhāgavat* or the particular play being performed is worshipped and a *Naamkeertan* is sung, followed by *Dhemali* or the playing of a percussion suite with *mridanga* and *jhānjh*. The *Sutrādhār* enters next to introduce the play in a song accompanied by dance

gestures. The play follows on the heels of this elaborate *Purvaranga*. The main performance is one conceived in terms of dance, singing, instrumental music, and acting. It was Shankaradeva, the great saint-poet of Assam, who began the Bhaona in the sixteenth century as a means to pay homage to God. It is the same religious desire that lies behind the Bhaona performances today.

The Bhaona collective held once every five years at Jamugudi has a social significance. One does not know who began this festival which has been held



Floor plan of the mandap.

regularly for two hundred years now. But it seems as if there had been initially an urge to bring together at one place all the people living in the one hundred odd villages of the Jamugudi region. All the Bhaona companies of the region are welcome to perform in this festival. There has been no provision for selections ever. This year there were twenty-two companies in all taking part in the festival held on 26 and 27 March. While the Baresaharia Samiti hosts the groups, the rest of the expenses are borne by the groups themselves. The festival took place in a *mandap* with a diameter of 224 feet, of which the central area of about twenty feet accommodated the Manikots of the different companies, i.e. the books in their ceremonial placing. About

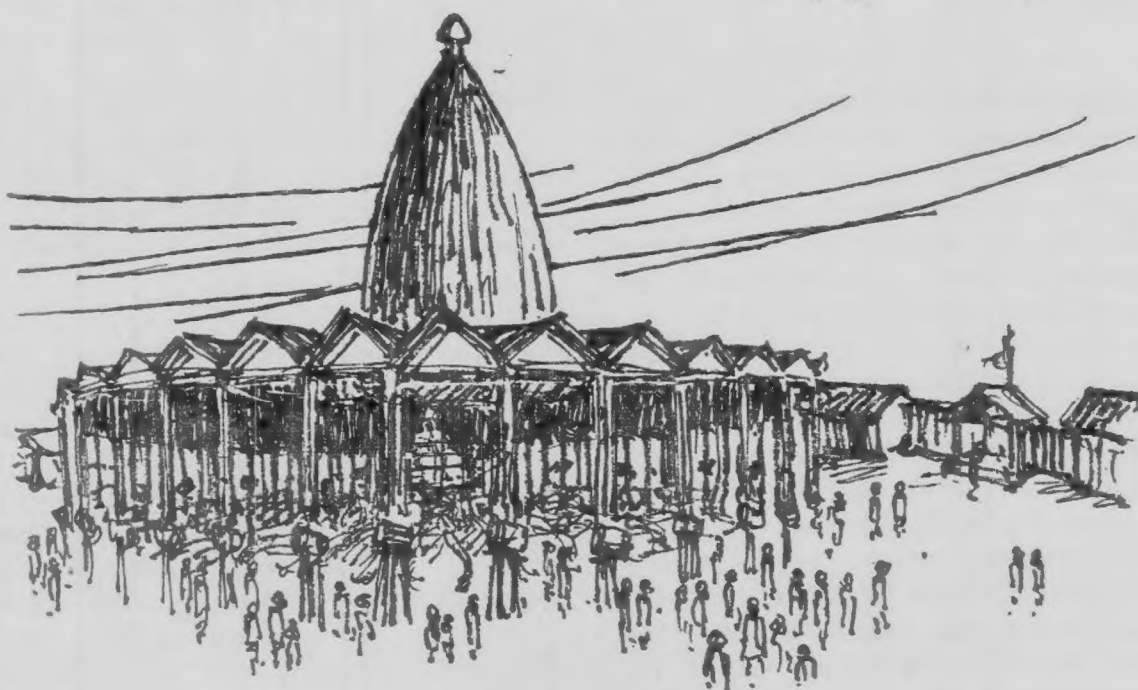
thirty feet space was left for *puja* and free movement. The remaining area was divided up into 44 parts, 22 reserved for the acting space, and 22 for the auditorium. In the space before the *mandap* every company had placed a large *dhol* for itself. A space of another 25-30 feet separated the shanties for make-up. Every company had its own dressing room, and its own gate. Inside the *mandap* the performers and the audience share the same level, with a bamboo fencing providing a separation.

The religious ceremonies associated with the Bhaona begin early in the morning. The companies take part in a communal *puja* and *naamkeertan*. In the afternoon they assemble once again for a communal *naamkeertan*. The performance takes place in the night, with the *dhemali* beginning at about eight with *mridangas* and the large *jhānjhs* played by a group of about ten or twelve musicians. After the *dhemali* the companies move into their spaces. The *dhemali* contains no dance as such, but the bodies sway to the rhythm of the percussion instruments, which are played with physical movements and rhythmic beating that create the impression of a dance, a performance created to the *laya*. The *dhemali* runs for something between an hour and a half and two hours. At the conclusion of the *dhemali* the *sutradhārs* of the several companies enter their respective divisions and use dance to introduce the play to their audiences. Surprisingly however, there is no training or discipline for the singers of the Bhaona, which probably explains the weakness of the singing as such. The *mridanga* and the *jhānjh* are the two instruments played with trained skill. Like the *dhemali* the *sutradhār* too with his singers and instrument players travel through all the divisions introducing themselves in a way through dance. The idea obviously is to let the audience sit in a single place and have a view of the artises of all the groups, their costumes, their make-up and glimpses of their skills in singing, instrument playing and acting. The

first night was devoted to plays based on the *Mahabharata*. Some of the plays were by Shankaradeva himself, the rest by other celebrated playwrights, the last of the lot by the Gossains of Namghar. The first night's plays included *Rukminiharan*, *Pasha Parba*, *Bakāsurbadh*, *Bhishma Parba*, *Drona Parba*, *Karna Parba*, *Briha Daitya Badh*, etc. The second night was devoted to plays based on the story of Rama and other legends. The list included *Pārijathan*, *Andha-munir Abhisāp*, *Ram Vijay*, *Meghnād Badh*, *Rābānbadh*, *Prahlād Charitra* etc. It took the Sutradhār and the leading actors about two hours to make a complete round of the 22 acting areas. The plays began only after they had completed a circuit and returned to their own stages. The plays continued till 2 or half past 2 in the night. In the interludes the singers and instrumentalists often broke into *naamkeertans* of *Haribols* or *Rambols*. The *naamkeertans* served to underline the religious spirit behind the Bhaona and keep the audience in touch with its religious basis.

It was only natural that there should be organizational lapses in an occasion that

brought together so many companies without any central control or direction. There were several actors in the companies who had not more than two or three days' preparation for their performances, and that was quite evident in the quality of their dancing or acting. The Bhaona does not expect its performers to know their lines by heart. It is left to the sutradhār to move about with the performers carrying his script with him and prompting the actors all along. The acting understandably suffers as a result. The lack of any voice training affects the quality of the singing. Microphones are not in use, and words tend to get lost. The costumes of the different companies follow a set pattern, with the Kings dressed up in the manner of the Parsi theatre, in velvet coats with tinsel stars, a flowing robe, a crown, and dazzling shoes. They hold in their hands bows and arrows, clubs, swords, shields etc. The other characters too have their characteristic make-up. The *rākshasas* and animals wear masks. There was greater variety and dramatic action in the plays of the second night. Characters like Hanuman, Jamavant and the other monkeys, Tadaka,



An overview of the Bare-sahariya Mandap



Mareech, and the bears provided in their dynamism, speed and amusing gestures not only entertainment but also a sense of environment and vitality.

There was something remarkable in the experience of sitting in the *mandap* and watching the performances of 22 companies. I am yet to find a reference to anything similar anywhere in the world. On the first evening the experience was exhilarating when there were ten or twelve Krishnas in the same costumes and make-up dancing simultaneously in the *mandap* at different points. At times there was a congregation of three or four companies at a single point, with other stages going empty. The strain of moving around all the time throughout the performance space, the interference from the loud drumming rolling in from all quarters, the crowds that often shut the actors out of view, all told on the performance. With 400-500 performers spread all over the area, there was the feeling that a smaller number of companies would have allowed for better viewing and appreciation.

The Department of Cultural Affairs, Government of Assam, had invited this year several theatre experts from all over the country to watch the Bhaona festival in an excellent gesture that other States could very well emulate. The guests included K.N. Panikkar, Khaled Chowdhury, Pratibha Agrawal, Nemichand Jain, Rekha Jain, and Kulada Bhattacharya. On 27 March the sponsors organized a seminar which gave the visitors an opportunity to comment on the stylistic and artistic values of the festival, as also on organizational issues. Most of the speakers felt that not more than eight or ten companies should be accommodated on a single night, for that would allow the spectators a better view of the quality of the performance and less confusion and disturbance. Since the *dhemali* has its fixed repertoire of *bols*, there was the suggestion that with a little more control and direction there could be an orchestral presentation of about a

hundred to a hundred and fifty *khol*s and an equal number of *jhānjhs* in a powerful performance rather than the disorganized simultaneity that marks the performance now. The experts insisted that the Barsahariya should be held at Jamugudi alone, and there should be no attempt to take it out to some more accessible or larger place. They had all appreciated the hospitality with which the people of the small village of Khekasundar had received and taken care of its guests. All that could be done in future would be to provide accommodation for some people at Tezpur or elsewhere. The practice initiated this year by the Assam Government of inviting 15-20 theatre experts from other parts of the country was appreciated, and the hope was expressed that this should continue into future years. The Delhi Doordarshan recorded and telecast parts of the festival this year. The Assam Government made its own video recordings too. The Assam Government's role in introducing its traditions to the rest of the country should be a model to other States too.

PRATIBHA AGRAWAL

#### Correction

The caption for the photograph on page 3 in the January 1986 issue should read : Fida Hussain as Sudama in Krishna-Sudama



## THEATRE IN TOWN : THIS MONTH

### GROUP THEATRE

- Bhumika—Surjasta (8, 27, Morn, AFA)  
 Bohurupee—Aguner Pakhi (13, 16, AFA)  
 Calcutta Group Theatre—Budhdhuram (16, 20, AFA)  
 Charbak—Uttarpurush (7, AFA)  
 Chenamukh—Aag Suddhi (14, AFA)  
 Chetana—Jagannath (8, AFA) Roshan (15, AFA) (29, AFA)  
 Gandharva—(28, AFA)  
 Limelight—Amitrachhanda (2, AFA)  
 Nandikar—Mananiya Bicharak Mandali (3, AFA) Neela (11, AFA) (17, AFA) (13 AFA)  
 Pancham Vaidik—Nathbati Anathbat (2, RS)  
 Pratikriti—Birsa Mundar Gaan (4, AFA)  
 P. L. T.—Mahabidroha (1, 30, RS) Ajker Shahjahan (9, 26, AFA)  
 Samikshan—(23, RS)  
 Sandipan—(22, AFA)  
 Sayak—Gyanbriksher Phal (9, RS)  
 Sudrak—(18, 30, AFA)  
 Sundaram—Naishabhoj (1, 12, 17, AFA)  
 Theatre Commune—Mahamashtaila (5, 24, AFA)  
 Theatre Workshop—Narak Gulzar (10, AFA) (25, AFA)  
 Theatrone—Tughlak (21, AFA)  
 Tritirtha—(25, 27, RS)

### PROFESSIONAL THEATRE

1. Bijan Theatre (5A Raja Raj Kr. St-5)—Bilkis Begum (Thurs, Sat, Sun).
2. Biswaroopa Theatre (2A Raja Raj Kr. St-6)—Swaralipi (Thurs, Sat, Sun)
3. Circarina—Kane Bibhrat (Thurs, Sat, Sun)
4. Minerva Theatre (6 Beadon St-6)—Cancer (Thurs, Sat, Sun)
5. Pratap Mancha (Acharya Prafulla Ch. Road)—Sudhu Mane Rekho (Thurs, Sat & Sun)
6. Rangana (153/2A Acharya Prafulla Ch. Road-6)—Sundari Lo Sundari (Thurs, Sat, Sun)
7. Rangmahal—Ashlil (Thurs, Sat & Sun)
8. Star Theatre (79/3/4 Bidhan Sarani-6)—Baluchari (Thurs, Sat & Sun) Pasher Bari (Tue, Wed, Fri)
9. Tapan Theatre (37A-B, Sadananda Rd-26)—Nagpash (Thurs, Sat, Sun)
10. Sujata Sadan—Aghatan (Thurs, Sat, Sun)

If not otherwise specified the programmes will be held in the evening. It is advisable however to check at the booking office for changes in the programme.

Abbreviation : AFA—Academy of Fine Arts, Cathedral Road-16; P—Padatik Little Theatre, 6/7, Acharya Jagadish Ch. Bose Road-20; K—Kala Mandir, 48 Shakespeare Sarani-17; KMB—Kala Mandir Basement, 48 Shakespeare Sarani-17, RS—Rabindra Sadan, Acharya Jagadish Ch. Bose Road-20; SM—Sisir Manch, Acharya Jagadish Ch. Bose Rd-20, UI—University Institute, Bankim Chatterjee Street-12.

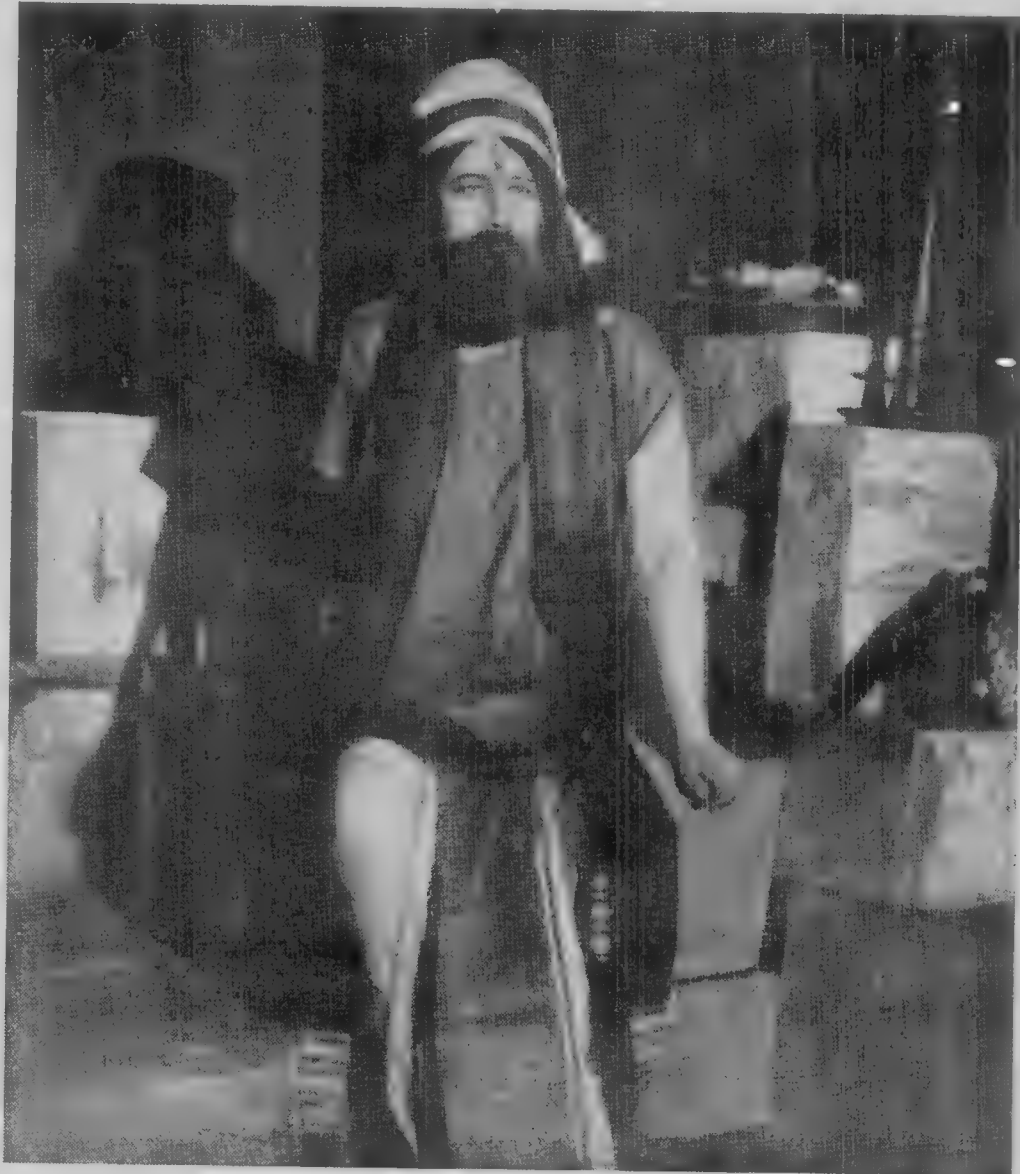
# RANGVĀRTĀ

News Bulletin of the Natya Shodh Sansthan, Calcutta

NUMBERS 5—6

MAY-JUNE 1986

SPECIAL TAGORE ISSUE



Rabindranath in *Visarjan*, 1923 : Jaisinha at sixty-two

**T**he Bohurupee masterpiece *Raktakarabi* notwithstanding, Rabindranath Tagore's plays have not affected the course of Indian theatre or even Indian playwriting substantially, and yet paradoxically, they offer the first serious challenge to the parallel streams of the European theatre and the indigenous tradition in Indian theatre. The general notion, often articulated by Sisirkumar Bhaduri, that it was Tagore's unfamiliarity with and distance from theatric practice that stood in the way of the stage success of his plays, is rooted in the puerile assumption that the Victorian Anglo-American melodramatic-heroic tradition represents the only valid form of theatre. Incidentally it is the same assumption that has led critics and theatre workers alike to harp on the unstageworthiness of Bijan Bhattacharya's pre-Brechtian epic dramaturgy, and provoked them to clip the wings of Bhattacharya's powerful dramatic imagination.

Early in his life, in London, Tagore saw the legendary Henry Irving on stage, and came away unimpressed. Never quite fascinated by the European theatre of the time, Tagore sought for a theatre that would relate the performance and the audience more intimately, with a rhythm running from the former to the latter, holding the latter in a rich field of music and choreography. As a painter, Tagore had let his figures grow into their settings, and the settings into figures. There was the same yearning for an unbroken continuity between the real and the symbolic, between the individual and the community, between the prose of life and its poetry. His plays—*Raktakarabi*, *Rājā*, *Muktadhāra*, *Achalāyatan*—demanded a different theatric mode yet to be improvised.

With the split between dance and theatre made absolute under the impact of the

Victorian fear of the body and a stultifying orthodoxy that would not let the dance spill over into the theatre, Tagore made a heroic effort to bring dance back into the performative curriculum at Viswa-Bharati, not in isolation, but as part of a wider creative practice. There was no major dancer who could take on his vision and make the vital connexion between theatre and dance. And with his death, the endeavour drifted into the soulless exercise of the strange and facile Manipuri-folk dance mix of the so-called 'Tagore dance-dramas', occasionally with a dash of Kathakali. A theatre, untrained in dance, has since chosen to concentrate on a primarily recitative idiom for Tagore's plays, often steamrolling the variations of tones, individual and social, occasionally even ethnic, into a false sophistication and uniformity, at the cost of the complexity of his plays. Songs and paintings had been Tagore's world in his last years, and they went into the texture of his drama, a drama of images more than the actors' gestures or modulations of voice—a drama closer to the ritual ceremonies that Abanindranath Tagore documented in his *Banglar Brata*. But still it would be unfair and wrong to seek a folk theatre idiom for the subtler nuances of Tagore's poetry as they surface in his plays. A rhythm beyond the words, around the poetic core of the play, and realized in the music and choreography of the action, and not in the recitative, could give Tagore's plays the life that is unique to them—a life that they have to rediscover yet in the theatre. Tagore's plays represent a theatric potential richer than what they have achieved as yet in the theatre.

S. B.





## THEATRE THINKING

### RABINDRANATH : REFLECTIONS ON THEATRE

Pratima Devi recalls in her *Smritichitra*: 'Natir Pujā was rehearsed and made ready at his (Rabindranath's) bidding, then before the public performance on the festive occasion, we played it to him alone'. Neither age nor failing health kept Rabindranath from his emotional involvement with theatre. All his life he remained very particular about the small details of production and acting; the scanty material that we have on this concern of Rabindranath is barely enough for us to have a glimpse of Rabindranath's conception of theatre.

In 1910 Rabindranath wrote to Pratima Devi: 'Our day of performance is drawing close. I am worried because I still do not know my part by heart'. He was never satisfied until he knew his dialogue perfectly and that was a condition put to all the actors and the actresses. He had always wanted to do away with prompters, and thus rehearsals with him were strenuous affairs. Shantidev Ghosh recalls: 'He told us in great detail how every single word should be accentuated, how to vary the tone of the voice'. He would even explain every single move—in Ghosh's words, 'in order that the acting be free of all clumsiness and stiffness, he would continually think of the gestures, postures and movements that would be in character with the roles'. Sudhiranjan Das corroborates: 'Unless he was satisfied with the way we recited, moved about and gesticulated he would never let us go'. Sudhiranjan recalls Tagore's role at the rehearsals for *Rājā*: 'Gurudev worked very hard to teach us how to act, we had to practice some of the scenes over and over again'.

Rabindranath was equally careful about other aspects of production as well. In a letter he tells Gaganendranath, 'The actor

who acts the Chief in *Phālguni* should be given a bow and arrows when he comes out of the cave...the others should wear colourful wraps and turbans and make the scene as lively as possible. Dress the *bāul* in white from top to toe'. He does not forget to mention that the road in the background should be invested with a living mobility. The requirements of acting would sometimes create another problem, when the playwright chose to change the dialogue at the last moment. At the very point of an actor's going on the stage, he would make slight alterations in the dialogue, creating a new tension for the actor. Even though this happened only occasionally, yet it is indicative of his search for perfection with the text.

Inextricably linked with performance, production and training is the presence of Rabindranath himself as actor. He has acted in almost all the plays with which he has been involved directorially, and about his own acting there seems to have been an element of surprise and variety all along. As the blind *bāul* in *Phālguni*, he came up with dance movements, sudden and extempore, which had so much life in it, just as in *Dākghar*, where there was no scope for songs (the original version did not have any songs at all), he created a different atmosphere when all on a sudden, dressed as a



Rabi Acting, pencil drawing by Jyotirindranath Tagore, 1881.

*bāul*, he broke into '*grām chhāḍa oi rāṅgā-mātir paṭh*' and '*bela gelo tomār patho cheyey*', bringing out all the tenderness and pity that Amal's situation cried for. He did something similar in *Natir Pujā* too. In the last scene, as the curtain was about to come down after the death of the Nati, he suddenly appeared on the stage, wrapped in a blanket, to chant '*Om Shāntih*' on the dead body. We could have dismissed these instances as cases of an actor's impulsive



Nandalal Bose, Rabi-Baul, (courtesy Viswa-Bharati Granthan Bibhag) : dance movement, sudden and extempore.

outbursts, if we did not recognize that this was the point where Rabindranath's thoughts about drama and theatre converge, with drama reaching the stage to open up new and independent ways of acting.

In his essay *Rangamuncha*, Rabindranath raises the issue of communication to the audience : 'The theatre in the heart of the thinker is spacious enough to enable scenes to be acted magically. There can be no artificial scene equal to the poet's imagina-

tion'. Thus he finds the native Jatra replete with possibilities and says in the same essay : 'That is why I like our native Jatra. There is no great distance there between the audience and the artistes. Through mutual trust and indulgence the job gets done there with feeling'. The connexions he had noticed between the life styles in the East and its theatre were articulated in his introduction to *Tapati* : 'In the age-old Jatra *pālās* of our country crowds may limit the space, but the mind is never constricted by the impudence of the painted scenery. That is why whenever I have anything to do with a production, I do not let them indulge in the childishness of changing the scenery every other moment'. This is so different from the notion of stage design that went into the early *Aleekbābu* or the era of Harishchandra Halder in the Jorasanko theatricals. In the productions of *Shārodotsava*, *Achalāyatan*, *Phālguni* and *Dākghar*, a lively naturalness on the stage replaced the painted scenery. It is this penchant for naturalness that made Rabindranath emphasize the popular roots of the Jatra in his theories of theatre. When he let the action of *Raktakarabi* take place in the roads and lanes and suburbia of the deadly city, he was probably trying to liberate the dramatic action from all its bindings and set it free out in the open. Like his ideas about the stage, his plays too tend towards open vistas.

In the last ten years of his life, Rabindranath, through constant experimentation, had created an absolutely different dramatic technique—the dance drama, which moved away from the conventional theatre in its reorientation of acting in terms of the discovery of the rhythms of the body. But this was no dry quest for form or technique, but a search for all the potentials of drama, stage and acting from an urge to make acting more comprehensive. Drama and performance never became for him a routine creative exercise. A yearning for joy, for liveliness made performance imperative again and again. Just before his death, he

would urge Pratima Devi to start rehearsals for *Natir Pujā*. His aesthetics of life found its perfect expression in his drama and its performance. Through his experiments he reached out towards an open theatre where the spectators and the actors would discover a free flow of communication across an uncluttered stage. His theatre thinking touched the indigenous roots of our theatre at that point.

DURGA DUTTA

## THEATRE INSIGHT

### THE GEETINATYA : A NEW FORM IN PERSPECTIVE

Rabindranath's earliest attempts at the dramatic were the *geetinātyas*, which form a class in themselves, in fact, a distinct genre altogether. Neither opera, for they were not primarily musical compositions, nor ballet, even though music was accompanied by rhythmic body movement, they were just 'drama set to music'. They were not compositions, 'which will bear being read', warned Tagore, but came to life only when 'heard sung and seen acted', that is, in performance.

The first composition of the kind, *Vālmiki Pratibhā*, written soon after his return from England, had a few songs, imitative of western melodies, which have often blinded people to the real innovation that Tagore was making. For there the songs were never that important. Tagore himself thought that it 'had very few songs which were important or attractive by themselves; they all serve merely as the musical text of the play'. What Tagore was really developing was an idea, at an extreme remove from the Indian musical sensibility—that of using music dramatically, in other words, using tonalities to convey emotions and building up a dramatic structure through the varied emotional inflexions.

In his *Reminiscences*, Tagore recalls: 'I had read in some work of Herbert Spencer's that speech takes on tuneful inflexions whenever emotion comes into play. It is a fact that the tone or tune is as important to us as the spoken word for the expression of anger, sorrow, joy and wonder. Spencer's idea that through a development of these emotional modulations of voice, man found music, appealed to me. Why should it not do. I thought to myself, to act a drama in a kind of recitative based on this idea?' He recalls that our *kathakas* (reciters of the legendary *puranic* lore) too had frequently broken into chants, which however stopped short of full melodic form, but there the 'expression of feeling' was the primary objective.

A form of drama, which followed a thin narrative line, and yet built itself out of short lyrical scenes, each expressing one dominant emotion evoked by sound, sight and motion together, created the possibility of a total work of art beyond all kinds of tradition. Tagore realized what he was doing especially in his use of music. 'The tunes in this musical drama are mostly Indian, but they have been dragged out of their classic dignity: that which soared in the sky was taught to run on the earth. Those who have seen and heard it performed will, I trust, bear witness that the harnessing of Indian melodic modes to the service of the drama has proved neither derogatory nor futile'.

*Vālmiki Pratibhā* was very much the product of the Bengal Renaissance when, according to Rabindranath, the spirit of the European Renaissance where man had seemed 'consumed with the anxiety to break through all barriers' had entered 'into our demurely well behaved social mould, woke us up, and made us lively till we were dazzled by the glow of unfettered life which fell upon our custom-smothered heart, pinning for an opportunity to disclose itself'. This new-born energy had 'struck out new

paths in every direction', and Rabindranath, with his feeling for the Romantic element in western music, which was, according to him, 'the aspect of variety, of abundance, of the waves in the sea of life, of the ever-changing light and shade on their ceaseless undulations', tried to translate this into a body of movements that could be seen, a cascade of musical emotions, accompanying visual images. Behind this newly found musical-dramatic form lay Rabindranath's acute awareness of an aspect of European music, which at that very moment of the Bengal Renaissance seemed of utmost importance—its acceptance of and intimate relationship to its material life, so that its songs were 'as varied as that life itself'. Fed on a tradition of music that transcended 'the barriers of everyday life' and only thus could 'carry us so deep into Pity, so high into Aloofness, their function being to reveal a picture of the inmost inexpressible depths of our being, mysterious and impenetrable, where the devotee might find his hermitage ready, or even the epicurean his bower, but where there is no room for the busy man of the world', he found this dynamism, this power to reflect variety, abundance and change suited to a drama where the dramatic lay not in the interaction of characters but the change and quick juxtaposition of conflicting emotions'. This form used with great success in *Kālmrigayā* where 'the audience seemed profoundly moved by the pathos' and almost abandoned in *Māyār Khelā*, where 'the songs were important, not the drama', found its finest expression in *Chandālika*. The story built around the emotions of the outcaste girl gains an extraordinary fluidity as the poet-musician switches *rāgas*, *tālas* and *layas* constantly, unexpectedly, and dramatically. The songs range through a whole gamut of emotions—despair, rebellion, desire, hope and realization, drawing from the story a relevance which is not only psychological, humanitarian, but also social. The social aspect of the play is very significant since it draws

from the roots of the Bengal Renaissance, which was ideologically committed to humane reformism.

Thus at seventy-four, Rabindranath rediscovers his twenty year old self and translates 'into melody the evanescence of life', according to him the greatest achievement of Romanticism, even as he touches the chord of humanist concern that came to haunt and disturb his last troubled years. Trying his hand from time to time at several modes of the dramatic, Rabindranath came back to the *geetinātya* again and again, for there alone he found a structure fluid and musical enough to give him a sense of freedom and the vision of a drama that could bear the movements of moods and emotions and passions and reach into the rhythms of the blood at the same time—the ultimate Romantic vision of the drama.

KALYANI GHOSE

## THEATRE HISTORY

### VISARJAN : 1890-1986

In 1886, on his way back to Calcutta after a short visit to Rajnarayan Bose, Rabindranath Tagore had a strange dream : a little girl terrified at the sight of sacrificial blood on the steps of a temple cried out 'Oh father, this is blood !' The dream haunted Rabindranath and he brought it to play upon the legend of Govindamanikya, the 163rd king of Tripura : to write *Rājarshi* (1887), the novel, which became *Visarjan*, the verse drama, in 1890.

*Visarjan* dramatizes the conflict between institutionalized religion and the religion of man on the one hand and between the State and Church on the other, till love prevails over custom—but only at the cost of the life of Jaisinha, torn between his loyalties, to Govindamanikya and Raghupati. Jaisinha's self-sacrifice symbolizes a rejection of the horrible system that had grown around the temple with its inhuman rituals and deadly



egotisms. Tagore's humanism gives him the courage to make a priest throw the idol away in an ultimate gesture of rejection allowing love primacy over blind faith.

The play, written in the traditional five-act form, was revised at least six times and Rabindranath never seemed quite satisfied with it. He made changes during productions and ruthlessly eliminated characters, scenes and songs from the English version, *Sacrifice* (1917). All these changes may prompt one to infer that Tagore was till then groping for an ideal drama form which finds confirmation when we see him abandoning playwriting altogether for more than a decade after *Mālinī*, re-emerging with a totally different form in *Shāradotsav*.

Tagore produced and directed *Visarjan* seven times, the first was at Jorasanko immediately after its publication in 1890-when he acted Raghupati. He often made additions and alterations for specific productions. In 1923 when Sahana Devi acted Aparna, Tagore made Aparna sing as many as ten songs. He also made changes in the stage decor. Initially Tagore used scenes painted by Harish Chandra Halder on cloth and they were still in use when Rathindranath and others played it at Santiniketan where they nailed the cloth to charpoys made to stand in rows at the back.

Later on Tagore moved more towards suggestive simplification. When he performed *Sacrifice* at Wigmore Hall there was just a deep blue curtain at the back, a few flower pots and two spotlights on either side. Footlights were not used. Later on in 1923 when *Visarjan* was put on at the Empire Theatre (Roxy Cinema now) the sets were still more suggestive; a flight of steps leading to a raised platform in the centre on which stood a plate of flowers, effectively suggesting the temple as well as the throne without unnecessarily cluttering up the stage.

Tagore himself acted in most of his productions and he was an extraordinary

actor. His performance as Jaisinha at the age of sixty-two made the seventy-one year old veteran actor Amritlal Bose say, '... as the play progressed I felt that I, an old stage-horse, was receiving object lessons in the art of acting' (*Indian Daily News*, 4 September 1923).

Sisirkumar Bhaduri, for his production in 1928, persuaded Tagore to make a few changes and declared in the advertisement that 'this *Visarjan* is a thoroughly revised version of the play as it is now known. Rabindranath himself has kindly sanctioned and directed all alterations, deletions and additions for the Natyamandir production. New songs by Rabindranath have been added, the sequence of scenes changed. Thus this *Visarjan* will not lack novelty' (*Nāchghar*, no. 5, 1333 Bangabda). *Nāchghar* warned, 'We have seen Tagore play this role (Jaisinha) ... His voice still rings in our ears. A comparison becomes inevitable. But if we take him as the ideal then not only the youngsters of Natyamandir but the seasoned actors too will suffer in comparison. As in literature, so also in theatre, we should not bring Tagore into the picture when judging others'. Rabindranath Roy, a young actor played Jaisinha, later Kankabati, the singer-actress, played it, while Sisir Bhaduri did both Raghupati and Jaisinha.

Bhaduri went back to the traditional painted sets. The temple was painted in all its minute details by Ramendranath Chattopadhyay, a favourite pupil of Abanindranath specially recruited for painting the backdrops, and Dinendranath Tagore took charge of the music. Sisirkumar, bent on authenticity, consulted the Tripura royal family for the costumes. Yet *Visarjan* failed to draw the public. Perhaps its reformative message hurt the Hindu religious sentiments, perhaps the theme was too progressive for the age. Whatever the reason, after Sisirkumar's maiden venture, *Visarjan* was totally abandoned by the professional theatre.

On the other hand *Visarjan* came to be produced by the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) and its various offshoots over and over again. It has also attracted the non-professional groups later on. Till date we have had at least 29 different productions of *Visarjan* on record besides jatra-palas and unaccounted productions on Tagore's anniversaries. Members of the Shishu Sahitya Parishad, an association of children's authors, staged the play in 1951 at David Hare Training College. The cast included Jogendra Nath Gupta as Raghupati, Naren Dev as Govindamanikya and Sunirmal Bose as Nakshatra Roy. Khagendranath Mitra, Kshitindranarayan Bhattacharyya and others took part as citizens. The performance was repeated at the Ashutosh College Hall.

The IPTA, fighting for social rights through performances, staged *Visarjan* in 1951. Utpal Dutt portrayed Govindamanikya, Sova Sen Gunavati, Kali Banerjee Jaisinha. Geeta Sen Aparna. Mumtaz Ahmed Khan's Nakshatra Roy provided subtle comic relief and Ritwik Ghatak's stylized performance as Raghupati was memorable. What was the audience's reaction to such a production? Sova Sen still remembers the incident when their group barely survived the fury of an angry mob at a village in Midnapur who demanded songs and dances instead of *Visarjan*. She said regretfully, 'Tagore is too sophisticated, too progressive. The dialogue of *Visarjan* which apparently follows the verse-pattern of the jatra is very different in character. Its poetic imagery is lost on the mass; so is the ideological conflict of the play' (Interview with the author).

Kali Banerjee spoke about the production: 'Initially the stage-setting was not very planned. We used to perform in remote rural areas, industrial towns and in open fields with the barest possible props and equipments. To us, propagating the message to the mass was more important than

simply creating a brilliant production. But when we performed in the compound of the Technicians' Studio in 1952, Ritwik made remarkable renovations in its stage-decor. If you looked at the stage from the audience's direction, the stage-setting would be like this—a huge elevated rostrum at the centre of the stage from its right steps came down to the main stage. An idol of the goddess Kali was placed angularly on the rostrum. An opening of a cave was contrived at a height on the cyclorama nearing the right side-wings. From this opening a wooden plank came down slantingly to the left rear corner of the central rostrum. A few boulders were placed at strategic positions on the stage to act as seats. To this was added Tapas Sen's tricks of lighting. Though quite new then, Sen exhibited his unique talent in the regulation of light (which came through the cave opening) to create the effect of day, evening or night. But the most memorable scene was when he created the illusion of a rippling river on a moonlit night'.

Incidentally, in the course of our recent interviews with theatre luminaries who were associated with the IPTA venture in different capacities, a slight confusion arose as to who had directed the production. Conflicting claims came across. Sova Sen and Tapas Sen remembered Utpal Dutt as the director, while Gita Sen could remember none but Ritwik Ghatak directing the performers. Again Surama Ghatak, Ritwik's wife, wrote in her article in the Ritwik Commemorative issue of *Chitrabikshan* that she had seen Ritwik toiling day and night, directing Jaisinha and Aparna. Kali Banerjee perhaps helps us better in understanding the situation. He said, 'At that time, there was no single person who was designated director. In the beginning, Utpal Dutt took the initiative. Gradually Ritwik became more involved with the production from the directorial angle, specially from the eve of the Technicians' Studio performance. The

lion's share of directorial credit for IPTA's production should go to Ritwik Ghatak'.

Why did Bohurupee in 1961 for the Tagore Centenary go back to *Visarjan*, an earlier play of Tagore's written in the traditional five-act form after having produced



Bohurupee production of *Visarjan*, December, 1961 : Sombhu Mitra and Kumar Roy.

the more innovative *Raktakarabi* (1954)? Kumar Roy explained the choice as yet another example of Sombhu Mitra's experimentation with Tagore. According to him after a series of symbolic plays Sombhu Mitra looked for a change in *Visarjan* as it provided scope for verse-acting which was a part of the regular training at Bohurupee. Moreover, he felt that the play had a contemporary relevance and needed propagation.

Sombhu Mitra too went to Tripura to gather detailed information regarding the behaviour, custom and apparel of the royal family. But the production was not a success. Was the play itself weak in structure? Or did the fault lie with Bohurupee's production? Kumar Roy, vehemently

opposing the idea that the play was weak or there was some major flaw in the production, said, '*Chār Adhyay* was quite a failure at its initial stage. After repeated performances, perseverance paid. Today *Chār Adhyay* is established as a 'popular' play. *Visarjan* too, if continued, would undoubtedly have become 'popular'. Unfortunately we could not, for personal reasons'.

Even though the play did not bring box-office returns it was acclaimed by the intellectuals. Sankha Ghosh, noted poet and critic, wrote in *Bohurupee* about this production : '... in the text, King Govindamanikya seemed great but lifeless; Bohurupee's production showed him in his human conflicts, conflicts with his own self and his wife, and how love for his fellow beings compelled him to sacrifice custom, conjugal happiness, trust in ministers, love for his brother and finally the regal throne ... all these became explicit through Bohurupee's performance... When Jaisinha cried, "Goddess you are, Goddess you remain", his tormented soul was incarnated on the stage.'

Shishu Natya Sangha also staged an abridged version of the play on the occasion of Tagore's birth centenary in 1961, at the Park Circus Maidan under the guidance of Narayan Bhattacharya. Khaled Chowdhury did the sets.

PLT was yet another group to produce the play in 1972, but with little success. Bivas Chakraborty commented, '... I have seen PLT's *Visarjan*. The performers of PLT failed miserably to deliver the dialogue or the meaning of the play to the audience. And it is simply ridiculous to think that Utpal Dutt is incapable of understanding *Visarjan*. The explanation lies in the fact that directors rarely feel at ease beyond a style they have defined as their own'. Chakraborty's own failure with the play in 1984 could probably be explained on the same lines.

He approached *Visarjan* in a totally different manner, preferring prose to verse. While preparing the script he even took the English *Sacrifice* into consideration. Songs were not sung by the performers but used in the background and as music served to create an atmosphere with 'Ulangini Nāchey Ranarange' usually sung by the citizens, while 'Rajaadhiraj Tabo Bhāley Jayatika' was used in the background in the royal court scene. This song taken from an early edition of *Visarjan* had never been used in any other production of the play before. The total production was an experiment, and Chakraborty justified it by saying that at different periods of literary history classics underwent such experimentation, evaluation and adaptation again and again. He also said, 'Perhaps it failed; there were plenty of reasons behind the failure. But the effort was sincere. And that bit of sincerity should not be an object of ridicule'. He has faith in *Visarjan* still. His optimism is evident when we find him considering a proposal of directing *Visarjan* again, this time in Hindi for Anamika. He would have preferred prose for this production too, but Pratibha Agrawal who is translating the play insists on verse.

Shekhar Chatterjee, however, dismisses *Visarjan* as a play. He feels that its failure is inherent in its language. It is pleasant to read but is not stageworthy.

In his dedicatory verses, Tagore himself refers to the initial criticism, '... Blood-thirsty critics come running after me to pounce upon the play. Remarking', "Oh, it's hardly dramatic with too much of the lyric". Yet the magic of *Visarjan* remains and persistent theatre groups venture to stage it with endless enthusiasm. Even the modern Jatra companies have been attracted by it. *Meerār Bandhua*, a recent jatra hit, contained the story of *Visarjan* as a subplot without even mentioning Tagore. It is a clear case

of plagiarism; but it also proves the mass appeal of the story.

ANJANA GUHA CHATTERJEE

## SANSTHAN RESOURCES

### THE POPULAR RESPONSE TO TAGORE

*Nāchghar*, in its column entitled 'Darshak Darpaney' once reported with a touch of fun an incident when the servants of a household went to see a play called *Griha-prabesh* on complimentaries borrowed from their masters only to come back disappointed since they found no play on the stage but only Ahindra Chaudhuri sick in bed, groaning piteously and the ladies of the house in a flutter. The report provides an insight into a period which was not yet prepared for a play like Tagore's *Griha-prabesh* with its mundane social realism, so different from a tradition fed on histories and mythologicals drenched in sentimentalism.

The first Tagore play in the Bengali commercial theatre was *Rājā Basanta Roy*, a dramatization of the novelette *Bouthākūrānir Hāt* at the Great National Theatre on 3 July 1896. Harindra Nath Dutta in his list of Tagore plays staged in the periods dominated by Ardhendushekhhar Mustafi, Amarendranath Dutta and Sisirkumar Bhaduri refers to thirteen plays before the emergence of Sisirkumar and fourteen in the period identified with him. But the lion's share belonged to dramatizations of Tagore's novels and stories with a smaller proportion from his early five-act exercises and the farces and light comedies. The more serious line of Tagore plays beginning with *Shāradsav* in 1908 remain untouched throughout the period stretching over a hundred years. In fact, the commercial theatre in Bengal still lacks the proper approach to Tagore. The subjects chosen



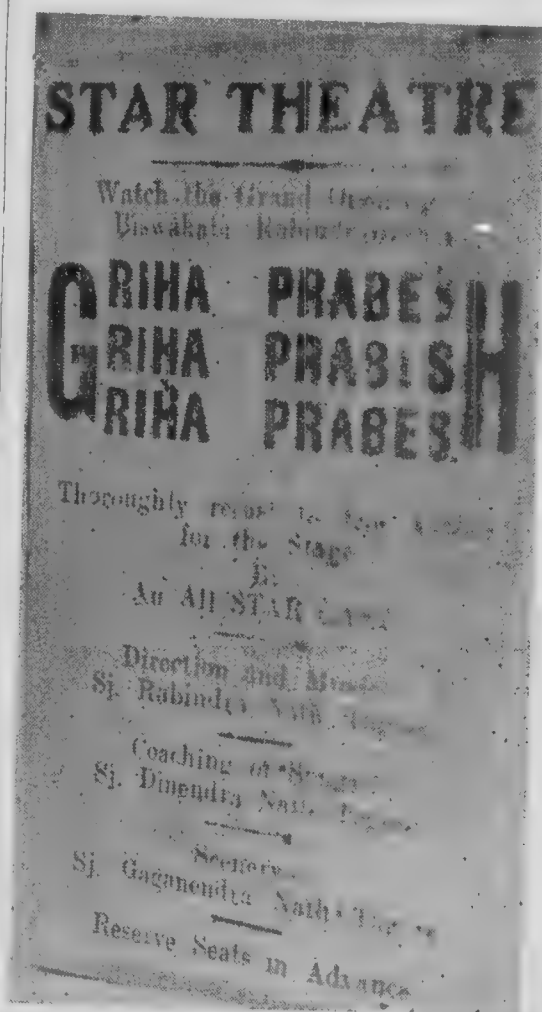
by Tagore, an audience insensitive to the subtleties of drama and inadequate acting have been blamed for the failure of Tagore's plays in the commercial theatre.

*Nāchghar* was one of the first periodicals to comment on the level of popular taste: 'The audience here is yet to get used to watching the performance of a play of this kind. We have to acknowledge with a sense of shame that most theatre spectators in our country lack the education, the sense of craft and aesthetic taste that can alone give them a total sense of satisfaction from such plays'. (vol. 2, no. 29, 1332 Bangabda). *Bānglā* welcomed the limited stage success of *Chira Kumār Sabhā* the same year: 'We did not need any divine foresight to predict that *Chira Kumār Sabhā* would charm the educated and the uneducated alike. Our prediction has now been proved true. Those who attended the lively session of the determined bachelors last Saturday would be our witnesses. There have never been so many women at any of the religious plays in recent times' (no. 27, 1332 Bangabda). The success of this play was obviously from its fun, 'for we do not remember any instance in recent theatre of a bout of laughter running to five, seven, ten minutes' (*Bānglā*, 1332 Bangabda). 'It was the fun that drew to the theatre the grocers and businessmen, those who sustain the theatre and constitute its backbone like the third class passengers of the Railways' (*Bānglā*).

If the audience was not prepared for the plays of Tagore, neither were the critics. An anonymous review in *Sisir* suggested that a play like *Griha-prabesh* should be thrown out of the theatre itself for its content alone. Writing in the same issue, Amarendranath Roy referred to the undramatic stiltedness, artificiality and cowardliness implicit in the play and above everything else, in Tagore's own words, to the 'crude European barbarianism'. Sachin Sen in *Nāchghar* described the Art Theatre

production of the play as 'a tragedy of high intention self defeated'.

While *Nāchghar* supported the production of Tagore's plays in the commercial theatre, *Sisir* had serious objections against what it described as 'entertainment for the drawing room'. 'We had no objections as long as Tagore acted his plays in the privacy of his own home. But once he offers his plays to the public theatre we have a right to expect that the common spectators would be able to respond to them. The stage should not be turned to a temple only for the aesthetes, it must serve as the temple of the Bengali race' (18 Poush, 1332 Bangabda).



*Grihaprabesh* at Star, 5 December 1925, starring :  
Ahindra Chowdhury, Niharbala, Tinkari :  
'A play to be thrown out of the theatre' ?

Given the problems of communicating to an audience used to a different kind of plays, Amarendranath Dutta and Sisirkumar Bhaduri were the two directors who were concerned with the problem of bridging the gulf between Tagore's texts and the audience. While Ardhendushekhara did give some thought to the problems of acting in Tagore's plays, Girishchandra was almost hostile to the staging of his plays at all. Amarendranath was the first to try to bring Tagore's plays closer to the taste of the audience through handbills, placards etc. The handbill for *Rājā-o-Rāni*, as produced by Amarendranath promised a 'Rājā-o-Rāni in new form, new structure and new decor/events after events—won't let you stop to take breath'.

Sisirkumar, who believed that it was 'the greatest responsibility of the theatre to train up the audience to real connoisseurs rather than making money', catered to the popular taste when he came to advertise *Visarjan* in *Nāchghar*, claiming departures from the text as it is known and almost promising the audience something different from the play itself. At the same time it should be acknowledged that Sisirkumar had recognized the greatness of Tagore, the playwright and honestly sought to produce stage versions of his plays more in consonance with the level and demands of popular taste. But even with his best efforts to dilute the density of Tagore's plays, to bring them closer to the people, Sisirkumar failed to make popular successes of his productions of *Shesh Rakshā*, *Chira Kumar Sabha*, *Tapati* and *Visarjan*. There was a touch of pain in his words when he said, 'I won't be able to play to the galleries in the conventional manner. I would have no regrets even if I lose at the box office. I'm determined to stage *Tapati*'. Reviews of several Tagore plays produced in the Sisirkumar—Ahindra Chowdhury era underscore a serious endeavour in terms of acting style, stage decor and general presentation to make Tagore's

plays more meaningful to the audience; but *Sisir* still sounded sceptical: 'The common Bengali spectator is perhaps not yet prepared to swallow an acting style so artistic. His text and its performance is perhaps in advance of its time' (9 Sravan, 1332 Bangabda).

But Tagore himself had already started revising his plays to cater to the tastes of the public theatre audiences when he added the Bostomi song in *Griha-prabesh* or *Himi*. *Griha-prabesh* was thoroughly recast by the author, as the advertisements proclaimed. *Nāchghar* in its preview of *Tapati* in 1336 Bangabda declared, '*Tapati* at the Natya-mandir will not be the same as when staged at the house of the Tagores'. Tagore went to the extent of creating a cheap, happy ending between Madhusudan and Kumu in his dramatization of *Jogajog*; with the agony of an internal conflict within a personality at the end of the novel giving way to a simplification for the audience. Still *Goḍay Galad* recast into *Sheshrakshā* never reached the target audience that it aimed to reach.

The commercial theatre never faced the challenge of plays like *Dākghar* or *Muktadhārā* and remained bogged down in the problems of dramatized novels and comedies. The entire tradition of the Bengali theatre from Girishchandra down with its high-strung melodrama and theatricality went against the deeper, sensitive realism of the plays of Tagore. Even Sombhu Mitra had to face the problem of an audience not sensitive enough for the 'conscious revelation that rises from the content and the characters in a performance depends ultimately on the spectator'.

The relative success of Tagore's plays in the non-professional theatre in post-independence West Bengal has not conclusively solved the riddle as to whether the content of Tagore's plays can touch the core

of our daily existence and whether the plays have a contemporary dimension. *Visarjan* alone has been staged in this period by more than twenty-five groups with every group trying in its own way to explore the convergences of the eternal and the modern in the plays of Tagore, giving the lie to the oversimplification that Tagore's plays represent an experience alienated from life and contemporaneity.

Throughout his life Tagore remained involved with the production of his plays at Santiniketan and Jorasanko—aiming at a select audience, trained and sensitive. The reactions recorded in memoirs etc. prove the stageworthiness of the plays. Sisir-kumar lamented, 'It is sheer bad luck for our theatre that our public theatre and Tagore never came together . . . if a close relationship had grown up between Tagore and the public theatre we would have found a great corpus of plays, a theatre with a national identity and an organic relationship between theatre and society'.

One does not know whether that vision could ever have been achieved. For the stage history of Tagore's plays illustrates more the creativity of individual theatric minds responding to Tagore rather than any intrinsic values rooted in the plays themselves. While Sombhu Mitra has demanded 'the right artistes', for the production of Tagore's plays, Utpal Dutt visualizes a post-revolutionary society as the right environment for the staging of Tagore. Shekhar Chatterjee finds his plays relevant but not living. In the meantime the search continues for a simple method of staging Tagore.

The Samsthan's archives with its collection of memorabilia of older Tagore productions, stage-models of Tagore's 1917 production of *Dākghar* and the 1954 Bohu-rupee production of *Rakta Karabi* (both reconstructed for the archives by Khaled Chowdhury) and clippings of contemporary

reviews recreate a history of Tagore productions that provoke more questions and doubts than simple answers.

DURGA DUTTA

## SANSTHAN ACTIVITIES

Sova Sen, the veteran actress, spoke at the Sansthan on 6 April at 10 a. m. on her teachers in the theatre.



Ms Sova Sen

She began with her days of schooling under the guidance of Bijon Bhattacharya—her first Guru—rehearsing for the historic first production of *Navānna*. According to her, Bijon Bhattacharya, who was very well-versed in the different rural dialects of Bengal, was extremely fastidious about how they were used in his plays. He even held special dialect training classes before regular rehearsals where he insisted that young actor and actresses practise pronunciation and delivery of words. She still remembers how involved she had been while working with him and how after some time she felt the dialect come to her lips as naturally as her mother tongue.

In her early days, she remembered, she was often flattered by the compliments paid to her performances till one day, Sombhu Mitra, then an active wholtime worker of IPTA, quite justly told her not to take those compliments so seriously and be carried away by them. He advised her to be her

own judge and to have a sense of humility. She never forgot those words and till today remembers the advice with reverence and gratitude.

Sisir Bhaduri directed her only once, that was when, in the fifties, she was approached to play the role of Udipuri in Sisirkumar's famous production *Alamgir*. She agreed and after a couple of days' rehearsals played the role confidently.

Finally, Ms Sen discussed how most of what she has learnt was learnt from Utpal Dutt. His perfect mastery over the art of acting, sense of discipline and thirst for knowledge are legendary. Sova Sen respects all these qualities in him and has over the years tried to imbibe them as an actress and organizer.

Speaking of Prabha Devi and Sarajubala Devi, noted actresses in the forties and fifties, who had no formal education but performed their roles with elan, Sova Sen recalled how Prabha Devi just sat quietly in a corner at the rehearsals for *Kalanka* while young actresses like herself tried to show off their talents. Later at the actual performance, Prabha Devi excelled everyone on stage. The surprise taught Sova Sen a lesson too.



Sri Shyamanand Jalan

On 27 April 1986, the well known actor and director, Sri Shyamanand Jalan came down to the Sansthan, to speak on his major productions. He began with childhood reminis-

cences, how the then famous Hindi director, Lalit Kumar Singh 'Natwar' planted in him a passion for the theatre and how he began acting female roles.

In 1950 he came in close contact with the theatre when he took a small role in Tarun Roy's play *Samasya*. He learnt a lot from Tarun Roy about directing plays. *Ek thi Rājkumārī*, a children's play and *Alag Alag Rāsten* were the first plays that he directed. Then in 1955 Anamika was founded and since then he has gone on directing a whole series of plays.

Mr Jalan said that he did not bring a particular point of view or preference to the theatre. The play should be good and the presentation novel—that is all that he asks for. Thus *Chhapte-Chhapte* staged in the arena, *Suturmurg* with its stylized acting, *Evam Indrajit* with its circular movement around the characteristic set of urban middle-class emotions, *Laharon ke Rājhans*, with its conflicts of the mind, *Gidhare* with its violence against conventional values and its evocation of horror and *Shakuntala* with its gestures borrowed from the dance all were grist to his mill.

He spoke at length about *Laharon ke Rājhans* and how the writer Mohan Rakesh stayed back a month in Calcutta for its production discussing everything in detail with the director and how the end could only be finalized a couple of days before the show. He did not think that such a writer-director collaboration was a very good idea, for the third act of this six/seven year old play was almost re-written and did not go well with the rest of the play. Jalan also hinted at the difficulty he had with *Evam Indrajit* where he had to create an atmosphere without hope or despair without positively depicting either. He had to experiment with poetry to expose its theme and a circular motion to depict life as a mechanical round. In *Shakuntala* Guru Kelucharan Mahapatra directed the use of dance mudrās (gestures) while Girija



Devi gave her voice in the opening scene. But it needed an expert dancer as actor to bring out the different nuances of feeling separately to make the scenes successful. He made an important observation in this connexion. Both Brecht and Sanskrit drama take recourse to alienation. Both tend to stop the action and make comments. But while Brecht makes us aware of the material and social roots of the action, Sanskrit drama takes us into the deeper reaches of human thought.

## THEATRE NEWS

### CALCUTTA

Sri Digindrachandra Bandyopadhyay, the well known dramatist, has been honoured with the Dinabandhu award for his contribution to Bengali theatre. The award was presented to him at a function held at Sisir Mancha on 2 April

Seagull Books organized a talk by Utpal Dutt on 'A playwright looks at 1857' at the Seagull Bookshop, Calcutta, on 15 April on the occasion of the release of his *The Great Rebellion*, his own English version of his play *Mahabidroho*.

### PARIS

Jean Genet, the French novelist and playwright, died recently at the age of 75. He had led an eventful life and was once saved from a life sentence on an appeal made by many including Claudel, Cocteau Gide and Sartre. His first play was *Deathwatch* (1949). Among his other plays, *The Maids* (1947), *The Balcony* (1956) and *The Blacks* (1928) gained immense success. *The Screens* (1988) proved to be less popular. His books *Reflexions on the Theatre* (1972) is highly controversial. He even scripted a film *Mademoiselle* (1966).

## BOMBAY

The Akhil Bhartiya Marathi Natya Parishad declared the drama awards for 1985. The *Kalavaibhav Natya Sanstha* received the award for the best production for its play *Vada Chirebandi*. Kanhopatra received the best actress award, Professor Madhukar Tordamalas the best actor and Ratnakar Matkari the best playwright. Among the other recipients are Arun Joglekar, Manorama Vagle, Rina Lagu, Mayor Chagan Bhujbal, Faiyaz Shekh, Jitendra Abhisheki, Jayashri Shejwadkar, Nana Patekar, Nayana Apte and Asha Khadilkar. The awards will be presented at a ceremony to be held on 14 June this year at Bombay.

## THEATRE IN TOWN : THIS MONTH

### MALINI BY BOHURUPEE

Tagore had found the plot of *Mālini* in a dream: as the story of a conspiracy involving two friends, one of whom betrays the other to the King and is killed by the condemned rebel with a stroke of his chains as he is carried away to his execution. The play as it emerged touched various strands around a central conflict between the claims of a religion of forms and rituals and institutions and a religion of love and humanism.

Kumar Roy, who has directed the play for a new production by Bohurupee, was led to his choice by several considerations: 'In Bohurupee, I have always felt it as a moral obligation to cover the entire circuit of the dramatic tradition. In the last few years we have gone through a Sanskrit play, a play by Brecht, an Anouilh play, a play by one of our best contemporary playwrights, Manoj Mitra. I'd still like to do a Shakespeare—that's a serious gap with us still. But at the same time I wanted to break out from the

circuit and do a Tagore again. Bohurupee has produced in the past Tagore's plays from his post-1909 'modern' phase, and one of his earliest and most conventional plays, *Visarjan*. *Mālini* represents yet another kind, with its lack of overt dramatic action, its uneventfulness, its sketchiness, and the fact that it had no songs, no prose even. I had my fears as to how far we'd succeed with this play which does not look so theatrical after all. That made it quite a challenge, especially at a time when acting in verse has almost gone out of the tradition. For a group, which is now constituted primarily of young actors and actresses, a training in speaking verse, a practice in acting verse seemed imperative. Bohurupee has always had this practice of recitation of poetry as part of its rehearsal / training process. That proved to be helpful for the young cast. I had my own experience of acting in the verse play *Visarjan*, but that was way back in 1961-62, and that too for only a few shows, for *Visarjan* remains one of Bohurupee's least performed productions. Still it was quite a pressure for me to train up through an arduous process a group of young actors and actresses. You have seen me in my last few productions designing and making the sets and scenes myself, but this time after the initial designing I chose to leave the execution entirely to Suresh Dutt, to keep myself free for the acting rehearsal / training.

'We began with straight recitation, and went through that for a time. The text loaded with argument and theory and concepts did not allow for the usual drift or float of verse. In explaining the text to the actors, I drew upon contemporary references to make the actors see the meaning. There is not much scope in this text to work/speak

between the lines anyway. We tried to keep the tune of the verse, and yet bring it closer to the prose of speech.'

'But it was no zeal for experimentation that drew me to the play itself. It was the Indian situation with the strains and tensions from religious orthodoxy and communalism and fanaticism that led to the choice. People have read *Mālini* quite often as a play about a triangular love. But when I read it again, I found its significance elsewhere. Somewhere else, not in *Mālini* itself, Tagore said that religion is not the lamp, but the light, and that the lamp is there to provide light, it does not serve any purpose by itself. This is the theme of *Mālini* at one level, and that we accepted as a banner line for our production. And there we saw the relevance of *Mālini*'

Answering a more specific question, Roy said that he had made no cuts in the text—'it was quite short anyway'—but there was some reshuffling of scenes, the addition of two songs, and as *prastābana* or prologue, a piece from Tagore's own *Natir Puja*, explaining the significance of the religious conscience and underlining the focus of *Mālini*. In the slogan that Bohurupee uses for its new production, it describes it as 'a play that does not indulge in darkness, but pierces it through'.



# RANGVĀRTĀ

News Bulletin of the Natya Shodh Sansthan, Calcutta

NUMBER 9 SEPTEMBER 1986

Serious theatre scholarship is viewed with suspicion in India. With too many acolytes inflating theatrical reputations and guarding their demigods against the slightest whiff of scepticism, it is difficult only too often to view a theatre personality or a theatre work with any amount of objectivity. Ephemeral in nature, theatre studies require careful sifting of a lot of subjective evidence or reminiscence to reconstruct a theatre piece. As the demigods grow to monstrous dimensions, they stand in the way of the objective view, and the theatre perspectives get irretrievably muddled.

The *Nabānna* controversy is a case in point. In an elaborately documented and argued introduction to a new edition of this play which sparked off the people's theatre movement in India in the early forties, I tried to defend the play against the 'literary' critics conditioned by Victorian dramaturgy who found the play badly constructed, and tried to visualize a 'tension' at the heart of this historic production which had come just before our time in terms of a confrontation of theatric traditions, the production values of the professional theatre strongly entrenched in Calcutta as they were brought in by the brilliant craftsman-producer Sombhu Mitra, and the visionary imagination of a theatre totally committed to the dynamics of society and history as it was conceived by

Bijan Bhattacharya. I interviewed actors and actresses in the original production, both the directors, and several spectators, and checked on almost all printed material even remotely connected with *Nabānna*, only to be told by an irate reviewer that all this was unnecessary, and all that I had to do was to get from Sombhu Mitra all that he had to say, and stick to that unquestioningly.

At the Natya Shodh Sansthan through our extensive interviews with those who have made theatre and those who have watched it with care and attention, and our accumulation of a load of relevant material, we are building towards an objective view of theatre in India. Such a view could lead to a revaluation of the entire tradition and several steady reputations, a revaluation which could ultimately redefine our theatre and its ideology for us. While it will be *our* obligation to maintain a scholarly detachment and a critical objectivity, we would expect some patience and some concern from those lovers of theatre who care more for the ephemera and the fads of theatre than for the future of theatre, especially in terms of its involvement in the social and political evolution of the society as a whole. The number of people involved in theatre studies remains too small anyway, and the least the few could hope for is—peace and silence. It is a serious job, and could do without hecklers.

S.B.

## THEATRE INSIGHT

### Dakghar Revisited

In a letter to Andrews, Tagore expressed the feeling that the Berlin production of *Dākghar* in 1921 was different from his own production at Bichitrā Bhavan a few years ago. The change lay in its setting in a fairy tale world as he could gather from his conversation with Dr Otto. At Bichitrā the stage was designed by Abanindranath-Gagendranath-Nandalal and it was beautifully decorated. The few photographs that are there show how the thatched cottage was beautified by plants and flowers, with intricate designs of lotuses and swastikas on the walls. There was a bird stand in front, without a bird; from the roof there hung a tailor bird's nest. In a corner in Amal's room there was a *Lakshmir jhāmpi*, a vessel and a *pradip* on a stool; even Amal's cot was decorated with designs. Through the door and the window one could see the star-studded night sky.

At a recent Natya Shodh Sansthan seminar Pabitra Sarkar found the stage design of Tagore's *Dākghar* 'too pretty pretty' interfering with the audience's response to the poetry of the text. In the same seminar Samik Bandyopadhyay drew the same conclusion from a slightly different approach, questioning Abanindranath's claim that the setting represented an authentic village home interior. In a stand without a bird he noticed a symbolic potential that could have been used to greater effect in later Bengali theatre, both professional and non-professional. While Sarkar and Bandyopadhyay found the over-elaboration of the setting of the Bichitrā production inhibiting, Abu Syed Ayyub found the sparseness of the Bohurupee setting dry and insensitive to the inherent lyricism

of the *Dākghar* text. While the former were obviously more concerned with the production values of *Dākghar*, the latter was more concerned with the poetry in the play.

Following the *Dākghar* text quite faithfully, the Bohurupee production centred on the window through which Amal looked out on a beautiful world—on the passing people, on the long road and the blue hills in the distance. The Bichitrā production treated the room and the window differently so that Amal's cot and the seat seemed to be placed on the road itself. The window that demarcated and distanced the room from the road in the text, was transformed in the Bichitrā staging that virtually denied the logic of the room. The road seemed to move around Amal himself with all the characters appearing around Amal's cot in the surviving stills. Early in the text Amal asks his Uncle to let him sit and watch in a room beside the road. But in the Bichitrā production the room beside the road was transformed to a road within the room. The room in the play was transformed to a road throbbing with movement. One could ask if this transformation did not invalidate Amal's yearning to leave the room and move out on to the road. But such a question would not really stand for the simple reason that Amal *sees* more in his imagination than through sensual perception. In both experience and memory Amal lives in the past, the future and the infinity. Time itself comes to life in Amal's being; so that even when the happenings are relocated in the road, that does not affect the intensity of Amal's joy and pains in any way whatsoever. What is achieved in fact is a taut tension as he tries to touch and experience both the ends of the road : a static point set in the hub of a road is fraught with a deeper anguish.

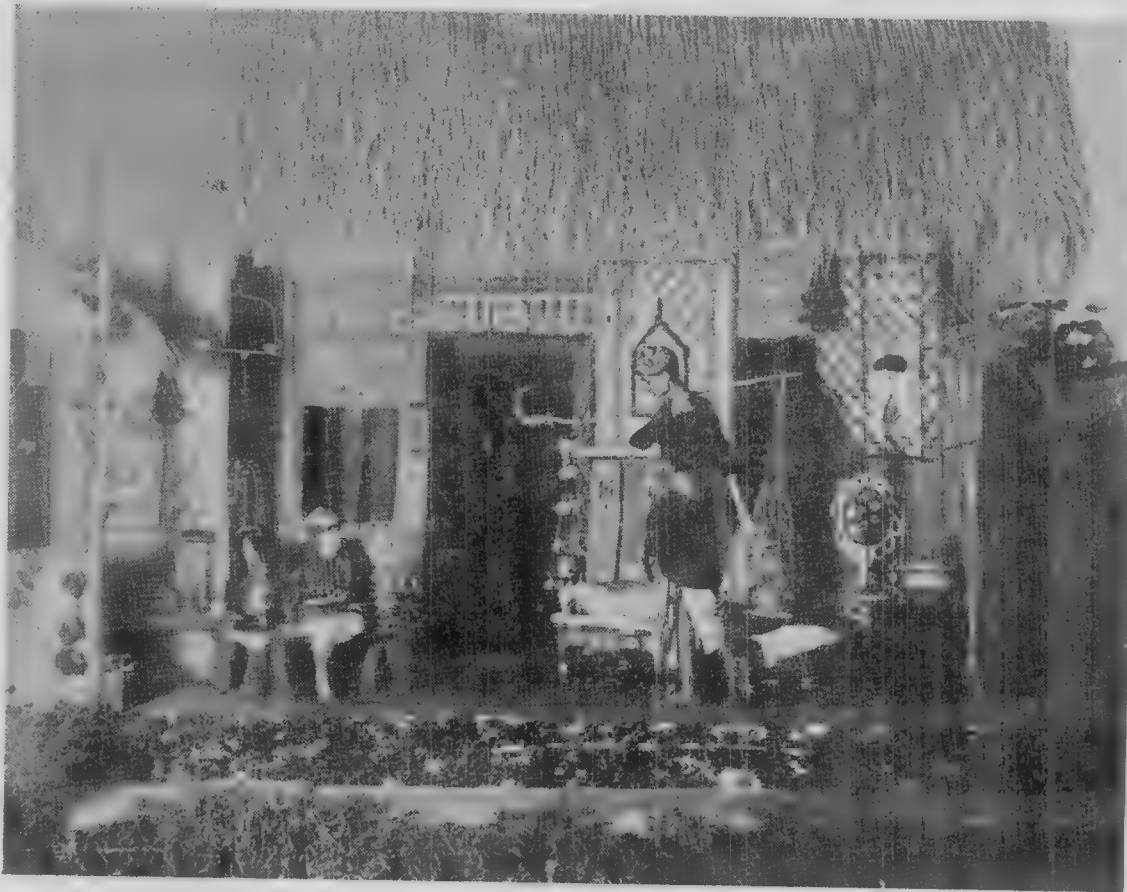
In the stage design for *Dākghar* Abanindranath and Nandalal did not

merely deny the logic of the room; they redefined it anew, the hanging stand without a bird and the tailor bird's nest brought together an image of escape into freedom and that of a home-coming—suggesting a quiet shelter at the end of toil and trouble. In fact later in the play Amal tells Thakurda that he has begun to experience joy from within the room itself. The Bichitrā setting may have been highlighting this room of joy in terms of the lushness of a bounteous nature.

The decorative pictorialism of the setting was not just a reflection of the effusiveness of the revivalist Indian art of the period; it was a necessary element in the meaning of the play. The traditional eastern motifs and symbols of benediction spread over the walls and the furniture of the room by Nandalal suggested a profound positive,

the positive in which Amal had rooted himself, the positive that Thakurda echoes when he admonishes Madhav Dutta: 'Silence, unbeliever! not a word.'

In other words the room as the Bichitrā designers recreated it was essentially Amal's in its very overloading of inessentials, in its devious distinction from a real village home, with decorations underscoring the spirit of the vision that is Amal's. Here lies the possibility of a second look at the over-elaboration of the Bichitrā setting that Sarkar and Bandyopadhyay found questionable. Towards the close of the play the spirit of the room is further defined when Rāj-Kaviraj would like to throw the crafty Morol out of this room and would like the room to be decked with flowers and illuminated by starlight with its doors and windows opened wide in expectation of the



A Scene from 'Dakghar' at Bhichitra Bhavan 'Jorasanko' 1917



King at midnight. The limitation of the Bichitrā design lay elsewhere; for while the *Dākghar* narrative moved from a sunlit daytime to twilight, the setting shut it into a changeless night with the moon and stars stuck on to a blue backdrop. The setting seems to wait for the King's arrival right from the beginning rather than grow to an expectancy in the last scene. The limitation can be explained historically for temporal dynamization of stage space is essentially a modern theatric idiom inaccessible to the Bichitrā designers. Still, the design as it was had the power to capture the inherent energies of the play. Every single decoration, flourishes, motif in the design suggested the inner beauty and pain of Amal's being; so that the setting proved to be inevitable and integral to the play itself. The setting was designed in terms of a juxtaposition of Amal's 'being there' and 'passing away', the point where the charm of life and the pain of loss met in Amal's sick existence.

The Bohurupee production used a barer stage design than the Bichitrā one representing a different kind of theatre thinking. Khaled Chowdhury in his fidelity to the symbolic potential of the play found the naturalistic appearance of a Kalābati flower an aberration that he had to dispense with. In his revivals of his own plays Tagore often made additions to the text mainly in the form of songs like those he added to the Bichitrā production. The Bohurupee production obviously did not have the advantage of the author's participation and had to stick to the text reverentially. While the Bichitrā setting remained static all along and drew its strength from the tension at the heart of the static the Bohurupee setting became dynamic to underscore the death of Amal as the skeletal room floated on the cold illumination of a full moon night to transform Amal's dying into a symbolic release. Half a century after the Abanindranath -

Nandalal model Khaled Chowdhury and Tapas Sen made a break-through which was beyond the technical capacities of the old masters, but the Bohurupee setting did not have the profoundly symbolic ambience of the Bichitrā designs. In a recent interview Khaled Chowdhury has said he would re-design *Dākghar* radically if he had to work on it again. The Natya Shodh Sansthan collection of stills, models and interviews and recorded discussions on the different productions of *Dākghar* bear evidence of the richness of a text which offers new challenges to directors at different points of time.

DURGA DUTT

## THEATRE NEWS

### Ghashiram Kotwal, back from the USA

*Ghashiram Kotwal*, the widely acclaimed production of the Theatre Academy, Pune, has just returned from a forty-five days tour of the United States and Canada. There were two performances in the 'Festival of India' celebrations and thirteen others in different cities. Fusing together the traditional—the *tāmāshā* and *rāgā*-based songs—and the contemporary—emblematic props, bits of scenery to suggest places, and acting techniques that seem to demonstrate rather than impersonate characters, *Ghashiram* represents a modern trend in Marathi theatre, indeed in Indian theatre. Yet to the theatre critic of *Village Voice*, New York, Eileen Blumenthal, who had wondered along with people who had 'endured' the Pan Asian Rep's dreary version of it last year—why the play had claimed so much attention—it looked startlingly like contemporary Western theatre—Brecht, Paul Sills, Joe Chaikin. To her this production



A Scene from *Ghashiram Kotwal*: 'an event that makes much of Western Experimental Theatre look like doodling in a bathroom mirror'—*Time Out London*

seemed to communicate across cultures. 'When a dancer weaves her body in front of Nana, holding the end of her golden red sari in a fringed canopy over her head, cocking her eyes, undulating and flipping her hands, all the while tapping an insistent rhythm with bare feet adorned with rings and ankle bells, we know we are seeing an essence of seduction and lust. And when a torture scene is just barely suggested and still just barely endurable, when a total change of mood is effected by the simplest beckoning action, such as having the Brahmin "Wall" turn around at a key moment, we know we are seeing an essence of theatricality that transcends time and place.'

In his conversations with critics and reporters on their return to India, Dr Mohan Agashe underscored the general insensitivity of American theatre audiences to theatric

idioms from other cultures. 'In Europe,' he had felt 'the presence of a longer and richer tradition of receptivity to international theatre.' The international theatre events at Quebec City and Baltimore this year were some of the first of their kind, and the audiences were not quite used to the kinds of theatre they were being exposed to. There was a concerted, well planned endeavour to introduce/publicize the performances to American audiences who eventually constituted 40 per cent of the attendance. At Washington, there was a full sell-out a whole month before the date of performance. The performers, used to receiving applause at the spur of the moment throughout the performance, found the silence of the American audience somewhat bewildering. It took them some time to get adjusted to the convention of the single applause at the curtain call.

### Sister organizations in Bombay and Pune

Theatre studies are entering a new phase in India with the emergence of several libraries, archives and institutes. Three institutions in Bombay are doing important work in this field, viz. the Indian National Theatre, the National Centre for Performing Arts, and the Ram Nath Pandit Centre for Fundamental Research in Marathi Stage. INT is the oldest of these institutions and has been producing plays for a long time. For the last few years, they have been engaged in collecting authentic information and material concerning the traditional folk forms prevalent in Maharashtra. Their research scholars have spent months together with the folk artistes, seen their performances, and documented them. NCPA is at the moment doing a wonderful job, providing facilities for cultural activities in general and theatre activities in particular. The Little Theatre, the Experimental Theatre and the Tata Theatre are designed to suit different types of performances. The Centre for Theatre Development, started recently under the NCPA, is collecting materials and information about the theatre in the Western Zone. They propose to hold a number of seminars and workshops, open an Information Cell on theatre personalities and groups and collect playscripts, video recordings etc.

In this connection, the Ram Nath Pandit Centre needs special mention. Started in 1981, the centre has collected nearly 30000 books including plays, books on arts and crafts of theatre in Marathi, English, Hindi and some other Indian languages, more than 3000 gramophone records of Marathi theatre songs, some rare publications, rare photographs, back issues of important magazines etc. The Maharashtra Government may give the centre a piece of land in Pune to erect a building to house the archives and the library, according to S. K. Pandit, the Director of the Centre. It goes to the credit of Sri Pandit that such

a valuable collection is taking shape. Our Director paid a visit to the last two institutions during her visit to Bombay in July-August 1986. She also interviewed Satyadev Dubey, Vijay Tendulkar, Vijaya Mehta, Arvind Deshpande, Sulabha Deshpande, Jaywant Dalvi, Om Shivpuri, Sudha Shivpuri and Sajjan. On her way back she also interviewed Amrit Lal Nagar, Kakkuji, Raj Bisaria, Krishna Narayan Kakkar and K. B. Chandra at Lucknow.

### Ariane Mnouchkine visits Calcutta

A small news item in *The Statesman* informed us that Ariane Mnouchkine and Helene Cixons are in Calcutta working on a play on contemporary India. Ms Mnouchkine is the moving spirit behind the Theatre du Soleil, the company that launched *1789 : The French Revolution, Year one*, adjudged the most extraordinary event of the Paris theatre season in 1971. Revolutionary not only in its treatment of history but also in its manner of composition and its bearing on modern France, *1789* was created by the whole Theatre du Soleil group out of improvisations reflecting the sensibility of the whole company. Mnouchkine locates her study of the Revolution and its theatre where it actually began : in the streets, in the great Paris fairs, reversing the standard judgement on figures like Marat and converting spectators into the eternal crowd that arises to tear up the paving stones and claim its freedom, only to be cheated into servitude by yet another repressive regime. Other groups have proclaimed the same message but the Theatre du Soleil—seizing on the crowd techniques of the Bread and Puppet Theatre and Ronconi's *Orlando Furioso*—was the first to demonstrate that it is still possible to mobilize heterogeneous audiences into a passionate civic unit.

Ariane Mnouchkine started her involvement in theatre as a post-graduate student at Oxford, where she worked with playwright John McGrath on a stage version

of *Ulysses* and assisted Anthony Page on *Coriolanus*. The Theatre du Soleil was launched at the Sorbonne in 1964 with a mixture of students and professionals playing Gorki's *Les Petits Bourgeois*, a play about Genghis Khan and a contemporary French play about fairground life, a stylistic precursor of 1789. In 1967 the Theatre became a workers' co-operative with everyone voting and sharing the profits; their next production was Wesker's *The Kitchen*. Cirque Medrano, a tiny circus, became their base till June 1968 when they put on *Midsummer Night's Dream*, playing to packed houses including an admiring Peter Brook. Later on in an abandoned salt-factory, their refuge for the time, they explored the Elizabethans, French and Russian classics, learning how to use masks and play *Commedia dell'arte*. Trying to improvise for a local show, they hit on the idea of *The Clowns*; a play and a technique evolved in which each actor tried to find 'the clown buried within him', resulting in a breaking of defences, a forging of psychodrama and painful self-scrutiny into a bold language of gesture and sound.

Michael Kustow, who introduced 1789 to the *Gambit* readers, feels that to 'say 1789 has been an immense success hardly described the infectious excitement of the performances, the sense of something joyfully shared between audience and performers. It was a real fete, an ecstatic collective rejoicing, happiness let loose. So it must have been at times in 1789, now in 1971 it had been brought to life again, overflowing from the stage, into the street, theatre becoming life and life momentarily elevated to the heights of theatre.'

#### Angan Mancha

After a fairly long regular run at the Academy of Fine Arts, The Theosophical Society hall, The Sindhi Association hall and back again to the Theosophical, the Angan Mancha closes in early October. Badal Sircar's Angan Mancha has been the

focus for a whole movement for the Third Theatre—free, conscientious, physical and open—which has spread over the years throughout the state and beyond. Sircar has tried to take theatre beyond the milieu and the language of the urban middle class and at the same time tried to bring them into a closer relationship with the experience of rural India and international militarism at another.

As part of the closing series there was *Janmabhumi Aaj* on 22 August, a montage of poems strung together with images of longing, hunger, deprivation and shame, images that 'our motherland today' would throw up. The group recite and act out the lines moving from one poem to another and back with ease, sometimes breaking up the movement with irony, anti-climaxes, and satirical quips, only to return to the birds with the broken wings and the cry for 'rice'. At times intense and poignant moments build the recital up to a crescendo of rage and anguish, as when a hungry child shouts at his step-mother for rice.

The other plays in the series, which promise to be equally worthwhile experiences, as visitors to the Angan Mancha will know, are :

- 5 September : Theatrer Gān and Shānā Baurir Kathakata
- 12 September : Michhil
- 19 September : Lakshmichhārār Pānchālī and Hattamālār Opārey
- 26 September : Janmabhumi Aaj
- 3 October : Gandhi

As the four groups move out of their regular Friday date at the hall, they propose to perform in the villages more often, and in Calcutta, only when invited, and once a year in a special festival.

## THEATRE IN TOWN - THIS MONTH

### GROUP THEATRE

Anya Theatre—Hachheta Ki (15 Morn, AFA)

Bohurupee—Malini (7, 14 AFA)

Calcutta Group Theatre—Budhdhuram  
(17, 21 AFA)

Charbak ... (8, 22 AFA)

Chenamukh—Aagsudhdhi (21 Morn, AFA)

Chetana ... (2, 16 AFA)

Gandharva—Sanatan Charit (3 AFA)

Lime Light ... (10 AFA)

Nandikar—Neela (4, 6 AFA)

New Theatre Group— (20 AFA)

P. L. T. ... (13 AFA)

Prayas—Danab (13 Morn, AFA)

Ritwik—Ekti Raktim Swapna (1 AFA)

Samakalin Shilpi Dal—Tagid (11, 30 AFA)

Sandipan ... (19 AFA)

Ek Thi Chandan, Bhabika Vivah

Sangit Kala Mandir— (7, 14, 21, 28 KMB)

Sapath ... (15 AFA)

Sayak—Jnan Briksher Phal (29 AFA)

Sudrak—Asamapta (12, 23 AFA)

Sundaram—Naishabhoj (18 AFA)

Theatre Communc ... (19, 25 AFA)

Theatre Front ... (5 AFA)

Theatre Workshop... (26, 27, 28 AFA)

### PROFESSIONAL THEATRE

1. Bijan Theatre ( 5A Raja Raj Kr. St-5)—  
Bilkis Begum (Thurs, Sat, Sun).

2. Biswaroopa Theatre ( 2A Raja Raj Kr.  
St-6 )—Swaralipi (Thurs, Sat, Sun)

3. Circarina—Chhayanat (Thurs, Sat, Sun)

4. Kashi Vishwanath Mancha—Sujata  
(Thurs, Sat, Sun)

5. Minerva Theatre (6 Beadon St-6)—Banya  
Prem (Thurs, Sat, Sun)

6. Pratap Mancha (Acharya Prafulla Ch.  
Road)—Sudhu Mane Rekho (Thurs,  
Sat & Sun)

7. Rangana ( 153/2A Acharya Prafulla  
Ch. Road-6 ) — Sundari Lo Sundari  
(Thurs, Sat, Sun)

8. Rangmahal (Bidhan Sarani-6)  
Abhinay (Thurs, Sat & Sun)

9. Star Theatre (79/3/4 Bidhan Sarani-6)—  
Baluchari (Thurs, Sat & Sun), Pasher  
Bari (Tue, Wed, Fri)

10. Tapan Theatre ( 37A-B, Sadananda  
Rd-26)—Nagpash (Thurs, Sat, Sun)

11. Sujata Sadan—Aghatan (Thurs, Sat, Sun)

If not otherwise specified the programmes  
will be held in the evening. It is advisable  
however to check at the booking office for  
changes in the programme.

Abbreviations: AFA—Academy of Fine Arts,  
Cathedral Road-16; MMB—Max Mueller  
Bhavan, 8, Pramathesh Barua Sarani-19;  
P — Padatik Little Theatre, 6/7, Acharya  
Jagadish Ch. Bose Road-20; K—Kala  
Mandir, 48 Shakespeare Sarani-17; KMB—  
Kala Mandir Basement, 48 Shakespeare  
Sarani-17, RS—Rabindra Sadan, Acharya  
Jagadish Ch. Bose Road-20; SM—Sisir  
Manch, Acharya Jagadish Ch. Bose Rd-20;  
UI—University Institute, Bankim Chatterjee  
Street-12; JM—Jogesh Mancha, Kalighat  
Park-26.



# RANGVARTĀ

News Bulletin of the Natya Shodh Sansthan, Calcutta

NUMBER 3 MARCH 1986

With two new video studios active in Calcutta, the city has at last acquired the necessary infrastructure to record and document significant performative experiences all over eastern India. While scholars will always be the first to discover a form and an event and create a critical discourse around the discovery, there should be immediate scope for a theatre worker to check out for himself the real value of the work. There has been an unfortunate gap all these years between the conceptual reconstructions/evaluations offered by critics and scholars of forms and particular expressions and traditions that they have discovered and a direct exposure to the discovery for the theatre worker or the theatre goer. Concepts have been added to concepts and been too often taken for granted to a point where natural responses have been inhibited or conditioned, and false models have been erected for contemporary or experimental theatre. Myths tend to grow in a country steeped in myths; and the new myths have been counter-productive in most cases. If Indian theatre has to take stock of its traditional resources and respond to creativity in all its manifestations, it needs a basic

library of video recordings of a wide range of performances, both traditional and new. The video set-ups running after sponsors for the most inane story serials in most cases, could do with some enlightened sponsorship for this more seminal activity. There have been sponsors for the big shows and awards for excellence offered gratuitously, but sponsors still fight shy of projects with lasting value. Newspaper establishments and commercial sponsors and advertising agencies have taken an initiative in Western countries that is still nowhere to be seen in India, where the publicity business still remains considerably brainless. One can only hope that one of the video outfits will take on itself the challenge to produce a few of such recordings, for the library-archival market looks quite substantial at the moment. At the same time such recording needs an input of expertise, a professional awareness of the possible approaches to such a recording; for otherwise a unit trained to shoot weddings and parties would give a view of a performance that would have no interest for the professional viewer.

S. B.

## PERSONALITIES

### MANOJ MITRA—PLAYWRIGHT, DIRECTOR AND ACTOR

Looking closely at the group theatre movement in West Bengal, one comes to realize that for quite some time there has been a dearth of socially relevant and stageworthy modern original Bengali plays. Most of the productions are either translations or adaptations of Western plays, age-old classical Sanskrit plays or plays in regional languages. The few original Bengali plays written in recent times are mostly either thematically immature or weak in construction or both. Out of these, a small number of plays are good; these are written by a handful of playwrights. Manoj Mitra (b. 22.12.1938; vill. Dhulihar, Dist. Khulna, now in Bangladesh), recipient of the 1985 Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for playwriting, is surely one of them.

Till date, Manoj Mitra has eighteen published plays to his credit and quite a few of them are yet to be published. *Chāk Bhāṅgā Modhu* (Honey from the hive), *Parobās* (Life away from home), *Sājāno Bāgān* (The Arroyed Garden), *Narak Guljār* (Chaos in Hell), *Mesh-O-Rākshas* (The Lamb and the Ogre), *Rājdurshan* (Visit to the King) and *Naishobhoj* (Nocturnal Feast) are some of his famous full-length plays. Yet he has not restricted himself within the bounds of full-length plays only. With equal ease he has written successful one-act plays like *Mrityur Chokhe Jal* (Tears in the Eyes of Death), *Tapur Tupur* (Pattering of Rain) and *Kāl Bihanga* (Deadly Avis) and a verse-drama also. Incidentally, *Mrityur Chokhe Jal* was his first attempt to write a play. Written

hastily in a week's time to provide his group SUNDARAM with a play to compete in a one-act drama competition organized by Theatre Centre in 1958, it was adjudged the best play there. The drama revolves around a critically ill old man who is neglected by his family. By nature the man is meek and cowardly; yet he longs and fights for life



Manoj Mitra

with utmost strength. The characterization of this old man is influenced by Manoj's memory of his grandfather. Manoj's plays laden with unerring human material and penetrating wit, have kept on flowing since then.

An M. A. in philosophy from Calcutta University, Manoj graduated from Scottish Church College, Calcutta, during the end-

fifties. Scottish Church College was then famous for its activities centring round dramatics. Playwright and theatre connoisseur Sushil Mukhopadhyay and Chittaranjan Ghosh were teaching there. Manoj also had some of today's theatre-personalities like Rudraprasad Sengupta, Partha Pratim Chowdhury and the late Keya Chakraborty as contemporaries. The whole atmosphere of the college was buzzing with momentous ideas which awaited patiently to be translated into dramatic forms. As a result, two theatre groups, namely *GANDHARVA* and *SUNDARAM* came into being. Manoj joined the latter but owing to some differences left it to join the former, a couple of years later. While narrating his life and works to Pratibha Agrawal on 5 November 1985 he said that *GANDHARVA* then used to bring out a theatre journal of the same name edited by Nripen Saha which perhaps worked as a motivation to join that group so that he could continue his writing without interruption.

Barring a few years when he was a lecturer in a local college at Raniganj, an industrial town some distance away from Calcutta, during the first quarter of the sixties, Manoj Mitra has remained actively attached to the serious theatre movement in West Bengal. His father did not initially approve of his association with theatre and wanted him to be a teacher. But after returning from Raniganj Manoj became involved in theatre with unflinching dedication. 'What prompted you to get involved in theatre?' Answering this question he reminisced that during his childhood in Bangladesh, theatrical performances by local villagers were held at their house during every Durga Puja. The sets, props and scenes used in those performances were stored at their place for the

rest of the year. The association with these items and the visual beauty of the scenes primarily attracted him towards theatre. Later, in high school at Dandirhat near Barasat when they migrated to West Bengal in 1954, he took part in various historical and mythological plays enacted by the students of that school. Simultaneously he started writing stories which were almost regularly published in the children's section of the monthly *Basumati* and *Chhotoder Pattari*, two reputed children's magazines of those days. And all these virtually helped him in composing his first play shaping his destiny. Since then he has been writing nothing but plays.

Outside his teaching career, he is an actor and director of repute besides being a popular playwright. He acts both on the stage as well as in films. His film directors include Satyajit Ray and Tapan Sinha. Among his hit films are *Bānchhārāmer Bāgān*, *Ghare Bairey*, *Ādālat-O-Ekti Meye*, *Grihajudhha* and *Kenārām Bechārām*. At present he is attached to his old theatre group *SUNDARAM*, regularly performing in its plays which incidentally are written and directed by him. His unique portrayal of the central character of the old man in *Sājāno Bāgān* can easily single him out as a powerful actor.

At least five of Manoj Mitra's plays are being staged at the moment regularly by major theatre groups of the city with fair box-office patronage. And as a redeeming feature it may be observed that the somewhat depressing situation of the parallel theatre movement within the proscenium here brightens up every time a Manoj Mitra play is produced, and a large audience receives it enthusiastically.

ANJANA GUHA CHATTERJEE

## SANSTHAN RESOURCES

### A TRADITION IN STAGECRAFT

Even with the association of artists like Dharmadas Sur at its very beginning, the professional theatre in Bengali placed the play and acting above everything else, at the cost of stagecraft. Dharmadas brought about a change in almost all the theatres of his time, but remained bound himself within the limitations of the period. When Manomohan Pandey exults over the spectacle of the flowing river in *Chandrashekhara*, Dharmadas's last achievement, one has to keep in mind that such achievements in stage technique were isolated instances in the overall pattern of contemporary stagecraft. A sense of productional balance and harmony was nowhere to be seen. The reasons may be as follows :

1. the lack of a feeling for sets and costumes among stage managers ;
2. a wholly commercial approach to theatre ;
3. the absence of a sense of historical space and time among spectators.

Still one can see in Dharmadas Sur's stagecraft the beginnings of the theatre centred in stagecraft that marked the later Sisirkumar era.

Amarendranath Dutt had taken a lot of interest in the designing of sets, placards, leaflets for the theatre, besides his natural interest in the plays and acting, but had shown little concern for stagecraft as such. Later it was Sisirkumar Bhadury who was the first *artistic* director in the Bengali theatre with a sense of the totality of the theatre. Contemporary theatre periodicals

were quick to recognize the values of the stagecraft of this period :

'There has been quite a movement recently for the use of historically appropriate scenes and costumes in our theatre, so that the theatre managers have begun to claim through placards and handbills that the scenes and costumes are in keeping with the country,



Dharmadas Sur

period and character of the play' (*Sisir*, 16 Falgun, 1331 Bangabda).

*Muktār Mukti* at the Cornwallis Theatre was probably the first play that took special care to capture an Indianness in terms of costumes and ornaments—a trend that reached consummation in association with the orientalism of the stage design of Sisirkumar Bhadury's *Sita*. The Bengali stage gradually

acquired the skills and the concern to create on the stage a sense of ancient India as well as the eventful atmosphere of a typical Bengal village fair. The *Hindusthan* underscored the authentic time-and-space scenography of *Karnājun* :

'It will be no exaggeration to say that the stage design and especially its sheer scenic beauty has been superb in *Karnājun*. The scene where the Sun comes to glow like a vermillion spot on the forehead of the Dawn, as Karna prays to the Sun god at sunrise, is exquisitely beautiful. Equally beautiful is the evening scene when the sky is covered with a scarlet glow'.

*Nāchghar* pays rich tribute to *Sitā* :

'Sisirkumar has followed the pattern of the traditional and beautiful costumes of India to bring the performance to a consummation'.

This was the time when stagecraft came to enjoy pride of place at most of the Calcutta theatres — Minerva, Natyamandir, Mitra. The theatre periodicals appreciated the stagecraft of plays like *Ātmadarshan*, *Rishir Meye*, *Bāngālee*, *Satyabhāmā*, *Sri Krishna*, *Jayashree*, *Nabajauban*. *Nāchghar* carried in its columns letters from serious readers on the costumes used in *Ālamgir*. O. C. Ganguly, the eminent art critic, was one of those who joined in the debate.

Charuchandra Roy was the main figure behind the thinking about stage design in the age of Sisirkumar. It was he who brought a sea change to Bengali stage design, at the Star and the Natyamandir. Pareshchandra Basu at Minerva and Satish Chandra Sinha at Mitra were among the other creative stage designers. Jamini Roy, one of the country's greatest painters, had a stint

in the theatre round about this period. The next phase came within a few years with the discovery of a new realism in *Navānna*—with its sackcloth backdrop.

The Sansthan has in its archives a representative collection of pictures of old theatre sets, photographs of actors and actresses in their costumes, and clippings from old theatre periodicals that should be of help to someone hoping to reconstruct or rediscover the approaches to stage design earlier in the century.

DURGA DUTTA

### SANSTHAN ACTIVITIES

The Ankiya Nat troupe of Uttar Kamalabari Satra, Majuli Dweep, Assam, was invited to perform *Bhawana* in two plays, *Rukmini Haran* and *Ram Vijay* on 13, 14 and 15 February at Maharashtra Niwas and Bharatiya Bhasha Parishad grounds. The play *Ram Vijay*, scheduled to be held on 13 February at Maharashtra Niwas was unfortunately cancelled since the train carrying the performing troupe was delayed by more than five hours due to the West Bengal Bandh on 11 February and could not arrive in time. The guests most kindly consented to the request to attend the performance at Bharatiya Bhasha Parishad on 15 February. Smt. Rukmini Chaliha and her group performed Manipuri dance recitals as scheduled.

Ankiya Nat—the new folk form—originated in the sixteenth century simultaneously with the development of the Vaishnavite movement in Assam. Based on stories taken from the *Bhagavata Purana*, the *Harivans Purana* and the *Ramayana*, it was made popular by Shankar Dev—the great Vaishnav



poet and dramatist of Assam. *Bhawana* or the performance consists of song, dance, instrumental music and dialogue.

On 14 February, before the performance of *Rukmini Haran*, Dr Maheshwar Neog spoke of the characteristics of Ankiya Nat; and Shri Kulada Kumar Bhattacharya offered clues to the understanding of the peculiar dialect *brajabhasha* to help the audience in following the play.

*Rukmini Haran* is based on the *Bhargavata* and depicts the story of Rukmini's love for Krishna who eventually succeeds in defeating all her suitors at the *Swayamvara* of Rukmini and takes her away by force.

*Ram Vijay*, Shankar Dev's last play, is based on the episode of Sita's *swayamvara* in the *Ramapana*. Viswamitra, the sage, comes to Dasaratha to ask for his two brave sons, Rama and Laxmana, to destroy the demons

attacking the hermitage. The two brothers accompany the sage and perform the jab. They then go to Sita's *Swayamvara* where Rama easily bends the *haradhami* (the bow of Lord Shiva) and wins Sita in marriage.

Ankiya Nat begins with the customary *Dhemali* which resembles the *purvaranga* of the *Natya Sastra* and as in the Sanskrit plays does not form a part of the drama proper. It is a prolonged series of dances by the *Gayan-Bayan* party with the accompaniment of *khol* (drum) and *tala* (cymbal). This is performed to secure the favour of the gods before the play is presented. This is followed by the *sutradhār-nāch* (the dance of the *sutradhār*) where the *sutradhar* interprets the story and sentiments embodied in the *sloka* by proper dances. The main play follows where each actor and actress enters the stage with dancing steps in keeping with their specific characters. Female roles are



Ram Vijay

performed generally by teenage youths with an effeminate appearance.

Colourful dresses, elegant headgears, masks covering the face and head and full-size effigies, characteristic in Bhawana, joined the dance and acting of the plays to win the spectators over. Comparatively though, *Ram Vijay* was a more spectacular and gorgeous production than *Rukmini Haran*.

## THEATRE NEWS

### CALCUTTA

A State Festival of Plays, sponsored by the Department of Information and Cultural Affairs, Government of West Bengal, opened at the Sisir Mancha on 27 February, and will continue till 2 April. Ms. Tripti Mitra inaugurated the Festival, with Utpal Dutt as the chief guest. The opening play was *Aaguner Paakhi* by Bohurupee, directed by Kumar Roy. More than fifty important theatre groups of the State are participating in this Festival, which, according to Indranath Banerjee, member of the State Government's theatre and jatra advisory panel, has been conceived 'on the basis of the principle that theatre should serve as a revolutionary mirror for society and civilization'. In a statement issued on the eve of the Festival, Mr Banerjee said, 'The Left Front government has liberated Bengali drama and theatre from all forms of oppression, has recognized and honoured the independence and radicalism of Bengali theatre, has supported and patronized the theatric activities of numerous theatre groups committed to experiments towards a theatre devoted to life'.

A Festival of Experimental Dances, jointly sponsored by the Department of Dance,

Rabindra Bharati University, and the State Sangeet Natak Akademi, at the G. D. Birla Sabhagar, featured *Angika*, an outstanding choreographic work directed and conceived by Chandralekha. In her daring combination of both the classical and folk traditions, Bharatanatyam and Kalar, and yoga, she opened up possibilities of theatric uses of the classical dance forms and martial art traditions, even as she offered her philosophy of the human body and delved into the meaning of the relationship between the sexes. Theatre critics and theatre workers could draw important lessons from Chandralekha's brilliant improvisations.

Calcutta had the rare opportunity of seeing Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in modern dress performed by Cheek by Jowl sponsored jointly by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, Sangit Kala Mandir and the British Council at Kala Mandir from 10 March to 21. It may be recalled that it was Barry Jackson in 1923 who was the first to produce Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* in modern dress for the Birmingham Repertory Theatre England.

### ASSAM

The Barechabaria Bhawona is a festival of Bhawona performances that takes place at Jamuguri in the district of Sonitpur every five years. Dedicated to the memory of the saint poet Shankaradeva, the festival is indigenous in character, and brings together every time all the Bhawona companies in the State and a large audience. The festival will be held this year from 26 March to 29 March. The Directorate of Cultural Affairs, Government of Assam, has invited several observers from other States this year to attend the festival.

### BOMBAY

For the first time Vijay Tendulkar, the famous Marathi playwright, is directing a play, *Saubhagya Kakshini*, which is also written by him. The play presented by Rangyatri has Tendulkar's second daughter Sushma, cast in the main role. Others in the cast include Amol Palekar, Sreeram Lagoo, Priya Tendulkar.

## THEATRE IN TOWN : THIS MONTH

### GROUP THEATRE

- Bohurupee—Aguner Pakhi (2, 23, AFA)  
Galileo (9, AFA) Rajdarshan (16, AFA)  
Calcutta Group Theatre—Buddharam  
(12, 29, AFA)  
Charbak—(24, AFA)  
Chenamukh—Aag Suddhi (6, AFA)  
Chetana—Rohan (1, AFA)  
Gandharva—Sanatan Charit (5, AFA)  
Nandikar—(7, 28, Neela, AFA)  
Natin Theatre—Prabartana Utsav & Nam  
Na Jana Tara (5, RS)  
New Theatre Group—Dub (12, AFA)  
Pratyay—Saraswatia (12, RS)  
P. L. T.—Ajker Shahjahan (8, 15, AFA,  
31, SM) Mahabidhroha (10, KM, 30, UI)  
Buro Saliker Ghare Ro (19, RS)  
Sanstab—Abhimukh (30, AFA)  
Sudrak—Ishabasya (10, AFA)  
Sundaram—Naishabhoj (17, AFA)  
Theatre Commune—Mahamashtaila  
(2 Morn, AFA)  
Theatre Point—Amlamadhu (9, morn, AFA)  
Theatre Workshop—(3 one-acts) Drabyagun,  
Dibaratra, Lathi (7, AFA)  
Pancham Vaidik—Nathbati Anathbat  
(28, Morn, AFA)  
Padatik—Janta Ka Shatru (H) (9, 23, 30, P)  
Mukhia Manoharlal (H) (16, 28, P)

### PROFESSIONAL THEATRE

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Bilkis Begum (Thurs, Sat, Sun).
2. Biswaroopa Theatre (2A Raja Raj Kr.  
St-6)—Swaralipi (Thurs, Sat, Sun)
3. Circarina—Kane Bibhat (Thurs, Sat, Sun)
4. Minerva Theatre (6 Beadon St-6)—Cancer  
(Thurs, Sat, Sun)
5. Pratap Mancha (Acharya Prafulla Ch.  
Road)—Sudhu Mane Rekho (Thurs,  
Sat & Sun)
6. Rangana (153/2A Acharya Prafulla  
Ch. Road-6)—Sundari Lo Sundari  
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7. Rangmahal—Ashlil (Thurs, Sat & Sun)
8. Star Theatre (79/3/4 Bidhan Sarani-6)—  
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9. Tapan Theatre (37A-B, Sadananda  
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10. Sujata Sadan—Aghatan (Thurs, Sat, Sun)

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Abbreviation : AFA—Academy of Fine Arts, Cathedral Road-16; P—Padatik Little Theatre, 6/7, Acharya Jagadish Ch. Bose Road-20; K—Kala Mandir, 48 Shakespeare Sarani-17; KMB—Kala Mandir Basement, 48 Shakespeare Sarani-17, RS—Rabindra Sadan, Acharya Jagadish Ch. Bose Road-20; SM—Sisir Manch, Acharya Jagadish Ch. Bose Rd-20, UI—University Institute, Bankim Chatterjee Street-12.

# RANGVARTĀ

News Bulletin of the Natya Shodh Sansthan. Calcutta

NUMBER 1 | JANUARY 1986

## Introducing the Natya Shodh Sansthan

Founded on 19 July 1981, the Natya Shodh Sansthan, a wing of the Upchar Trust, is a research and information centre documenting the growth and present trends of Indian theatre, and providing a meeting

point for theatre workers and critics and scholars from all over India. In a little over four years, the Sansthan has accumulated about a thousand books including a fairly wide range of theoretical and informative works on theatre and a selection of major plays in English and the Indian languages in original and translations alike; nearly four hundred records in discs and cassettes of theatre songs and plays from the early twentieth century down to contemporary classics like *Raja* (selected scenes) in Bengali.



The Inauguration.

*Ghashiram Kotwal* in Marathi, *Aadhey Adhurey* in Hindi and *Jokoomarswami* in Kannada; and about thirty stage models for major Indian productions. The Sansthan's monthly sessions featuring discussions and talks, have featured some of India's foremost theatre personalities including Tripti Mitra, Utpal Dutt, Master Fida Hussain, Amol and Chitra Palekar, Tapas Sen, C. C. Mehta, Vasant Kanetkar, Bhanu Shankar Mehta, Ajitesh Banerjee, Manoj Mitra, Badal Sircar, Ketaki Dutta, Jyotsna Dutt, Bibhas Chakraborty, Angurbala, Sarajubala Devi, Manmatha Roy, Saumitra Chatterjee, Anup Kumar, and the visiting Italian company, Theatre dell' IRAA. All these sessions, often with musical illustrations and bits and pieces of recitation and acting, have been recorded and transcribed, forming part of the Sansthan's archives, along with recordings and transcripts of exclusive long interviews (conducted by the Sansthan) with about seventy eminent Indian theatre personalities. The Sansthan maintains well substantiated files of information on about two hundred Indian theatre personalities, institutions and groups, with updated details. The Sansthan's rich collection should provide invaluable source material to scholars and theatre workers alike, and should eventually lead to a more critical and better informed setting for theatre activity in the country at large.

Now housed in a congenial and convenient setting, the Sansthan, open Tuesdays through Saturdays from 12 to 7 p.m. and on Sundays from 9.30 a.m. to 1 p.m., offers reading room and reference facilities to interested people, welcomes inquiries on theatre, local and national. Its recent programmes have included playreadings, performances of traditional theatre, book

discussions and talks. The Sansthan has a team of research fellows collecting and studying materials for the archive and receives support and assistance from the Ford Foundation and the Sangeet Natak Akademi for the purpose. The Sansthan keeps about 300 people on its regular mailing list informed about its programmes and acquisitions, and goes on adding to the mailing list as people show interest. The Sansthan will launch its publishing programme later this year with Dr Pratibha Agrawal's monograph on Master Fida Hussain, based on the Sansthan's long interview in 1982 with this year's Sangeet Natak Akademi awardee for acting; to be followed by a monograph on the evolution of stage design in modern Bengali theatre, based on the Sansthan's interviews with Khaled Chowdhury and Tapas Sen. The Sansthan's news bulletin, *Rangvartā*, will highlight the Sansthan's activities and acquisitions in its endeavour to draw more people in to participate in its overall programme, and provide information on theatre events all over India, with special focus on eastern India, which is still to get its share of the national exposure.





## PERSONALITIES

### Fida Hussain : the grand ol' master of Parsi Theatre

The 'Parsi Theatre' is little more than memory now. Emerging in the second half of the last century in Western India, it soon spread into the northern and eastern parts of the country. The Parsi Theatre drew on the conventions of Elizabethan drama, Victorian melodrama and several folk and religious ballads popular in northern India. Spectacularly produced, colourfully grand and musically rich, this genre slowly faded into oblivion with the advent of the talkies from lack of popular support.

Master Fida Hussain (b. 11 March 1899, Moradabad), this year's recipient of the Sangeet Natak Akademy award for acting, is one of the remaining few grand old men of the once-popular Parsi Theatre. After dominating the world of Parsi theatre for fifty years he retired in 1968. During the last 18 years of his career he was with Moonlight Theatre, Calcutta as hero and director.

From a very early age, Fida Hussain was fond of music and drama. During his teens, on numerous occasions, he was punished severely by his guardians for attending 'Tamasha' or 'Nautanki' programmes held in the village by local or visiting drama companies. But in vain; it could not weaken his resolve. At last, at the age of sixteen, he defied his family and joined a local *swang* (a folk theatre form) group. In 1918, he became a regular professional performer with the New Alfred Company—a leading Parsi theatre company, under the aegis of Pandit Radhe Shyam Kathavachak, the then resident-director of the group, who himself was a disciple of Pandit Madan Mohan Mal-

viya. Incidentally, it was Pandit Malviya who later gave Fida Hussain the title 'Premshankar'.

During an interview with Pratibha Agrawal, Director, Natya Shodh Sansthan, and



Fida Hussain as Narsi in *Narsi Mehta*

Samik Bandyopadhyay on 25 April 1982 at Calcutta, he recalled the disciplined life of the theatre company and its rigorous training method. Keeping with the trend of the period, like all other young boys with melodious voices, he was cast for female roles. It was only in 1930 after twelve long years, that he got his first male role 'Majnu' in *Laila-Majnu*. But it was the female lead in *Parivartan* (1922)—a social drama—that gained him popularity, especially for his

unforgettable rendering of the song 'Jane Kya Kya Hay Chhupa Hua/Sarkar tumhari Ankhon mein'. But his favourite role was that of Narsi in *Bhakta Narsi Mehta*.

In 1932, Master Fida Hussain joined the Bharat Laxmi Studio in Calcutta as the New Alfred Theatre folded up. He acted and sang in eight talkies—*Ramayana*, *Mastana*, *Dil ki piyas*, *Insaf ki tope*, *Dil jani mastana*, *Daku ka ladka*, *Khudai khidmatgar* and *Matwali Meera*. His directors included Debaki Bose, Prafulla Roy and Charu Roy.

Fida Hussain has to his credit as many as 200 three-and-a-half minute discs with HMV between 1933 and 1952 of stage-songs and plays. At the moment however, these are not readily available.

In the course of his NSS interview, asked about the reason of his retirement in 1968 when he was still very popular and active, he had replied with a shy remark, 'Don't you know, actors, prostitutes and racing horses are most sought after in their youth? Nobody really wants them when they are old.'

We would not quite agree with him, for he still remains a personality whose company is very much sought after. Anybody would enjoy his vivid accounts of Parsi theatre, and Indian theatre has undoubtedly much to gain from his rich experience as an actor-director spanning about six decades.

ANJANA GUHA CHATTERJEE

## SANSTHAN RESOURCES

### Bengali Theatre Songs : A long tradition

Dinabandhu Mitra found songs irrelevant for his play *Nildarpan*. The producer and actors too, when enacting the play at

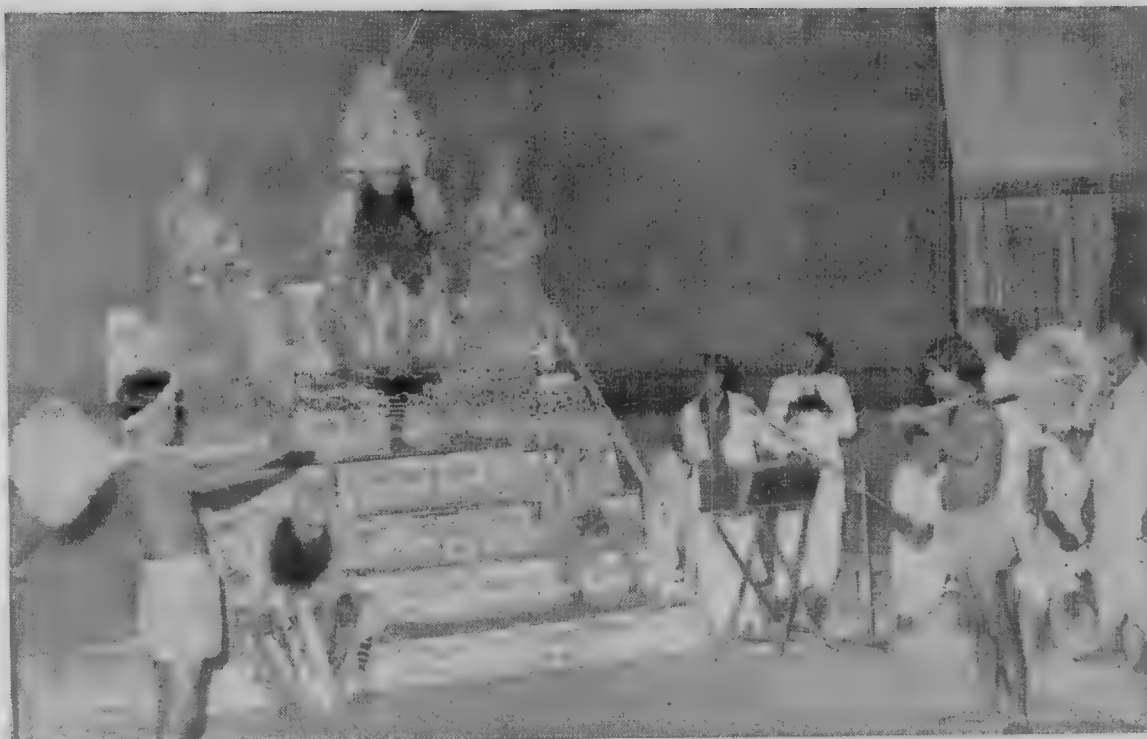
the National Theatre, never felt the need for songs. Perhaps the stark realism of *Nildarpan* itself went against songs. In later years however Bengali theatre leaned towards historical and mythological themes with all



Narisundari

the romance they conjured up. The songs contributed to the romantic aura that grew around the plays. Soon the elements of song and dance came to stand out as an added attraction for a play. 'Songs dripping with heavenly nectar, the grace of the dances and the harmony of acting'—were the words in which *Bāṅla*, a Bengali weekly, reviewed the play *Atmadarshan* in one of its issues in 1332 Bangabāda; and these were indeed the primary ingredients on which most plays thrived then. The whole line of director-producers from Girish Chandra Ghosh to Sisir Kumar Bhaduri looked for plays with these elements in mind.

Singer-dancers soon came to claim their place beside the actors and actresses in the public theatres. The producers woke up to the importance of songs in the theatre, and soon public theatres were appointing singers as standing members of the company. Purna Chandra Ghosh was one of the earliest



A Scene From *Prahlada Nataka*

## SANSTHAN ACTIVITIES

In the last two months of the just concluded year, Natya Shodh Sansthan had organized various programmes.

On 19 November the Teatro Dell' IRRA, a small Italian theatre group with its rich background of inter-ethnic explorations presented a lecture-demonstration to theatre enthusiasts and critics at the Sansthan. Teatro Dell' IRRA usually camps among the tribals and backward classes of different countries to understand and learn their lifestyles, rituals and taboos to evolve a new form of dramatic communication. They never use dialogues in their plays; instead they depend on varied physical forms to

express the message. Raffaella Rossellini, daughter of the noted Italian film director Roberto Rossellini, is the key performer of this group.

At yet another session at the Sansthan Hall, Vasant Kanetkar, well-known Marathi dramatist, met theatre-workers and critics of the city on 26 November 1985. He had received the Sangeet Natak Akademy award for playwriting in 1984.

The Sansthan, in collaboration with the Orissa Sangeet Natak Akademy, presented the *Prahlāda Nātaka* performed by a group from Orissa led by their Guru Raghunath Satpati of Ganjam on the evenings of 30 November and 1 December 1985. *Prahlāda Nātaka* is being performed in Orissa since 1880. It is not a classical drama in its true sense, the whole text is a continuous piece

singer-actors in the Bengali theatre, and contemporaneous with Girish Chandra Ghosh. Jugal Pal, Nanilal Banerjee and Krishna Chandra De dominated the stage as singer-actors in later years. Narisundari, Ranisundari, Sushila, Nagendrabala, Ashcharyamoyee, Subashini, Indubala and Angoorbala were the best known of the singer-actresses who cast their spell on theatregoers with their songs. When we read *Bāngla* (1332 Bangabda) reporting, 'After ages Narisundari—the Dalani Begum of the Bengali theatre—will sing *Aju kahan meri hriday ki raja* ('Where is the king of my heart today?') for which millions still yearn', we can realize how popular she was as a singer even in her later years. Almost all the singers of the stage were applauded with endless



**Narisundari**

encores from the audience. There were singers unattached to the stage companies also rendering hit songs from stage successes. Bedana Dasi was one such singer who specialized in theatre songs.

But it is hard to guess the singing styles of those days. How can one identify the magic with which the singers bewitched their audiences every night or how they played

with different pitches and tonal shifts to move the audience to madness? How did Narisundari for instance set the hearts of the audience throbbing with her *Kāncha bayas dekhe aamar* ('at the sight of my unripe youth...') in *Jādukari* or *Pirite biporite maje ogo mon* in the same play? How did Sushila let the emotions flow through her *Jamon āchho temni thāko* ('Stay as you are...') in *Nirmalā*? How did Nanilal Banerjee lose himself while singing *Tāka tāka* (Money, money...) in *Pānipath*? How did Subashini with her *Baroshā āilo oi ghanaghor meghe* ('There, comes the rain with her dark, grim clouds...') in *Sinhal Vijay* or Ranisundari with her *Porar muye* ('To your blasted face...') in *Rajābāhādur* bring down the auditorium with encores? How did Angoorbala cast a spell of austere withdrawal with her *Aami aami bole kārē bhābo mon* ('Who do you think you are with your I and I...')? All these remain shrouded in mystery. What remains of the tradition is a collection of recordings made by the Gramophone Company, mostly lost, but surfacing from time to time in old family collections. The Natya Shodh Sansthan has a collection now of these records—about fifty of these gems—allowing sensitive listeners and scholars an opportunity to study and evaluate these and resurrect a little of the forgotten tradition. These records provide a rare insight into the spirit of the theatre of the times. Significantly enough, the first session of the Sansthan was devoted to a presentation on the theatre songs from the old Bengali theatre by Gita Sen, who is engaged on a research project on the subject.

DURGA DUTTA

with no scenic divisions or acts. It is more or less in the form of *Swang* with a large number of songs for the characters to sing. It has drawn its style of presentation simultaneously from the Yakshagana, Oriya poetic conventions, the Desia Nata as performed by the Koraput tribals and the tradition of dance, visitation and exorcism associated with masks used in tantrik cults and the Orissan theatric form known as the Danda Nata. The story revolves around King Hiranyakashipu and his son Prahlada.

On the morning of 1 December there was a post-performance study-session on the *Nataka* at the Sansthan.

#### Future Activities

A session with Manoj Mitra who has received the Akademy Award 1985 for play-writing will be held on 25.1.86 at the Sansthan.

### THEATRE NEWS

#### CALCUTTA

Youth Theatre Festival '85 (Eastern Zone) was held at Rabindra Sadan, Calcutta from 23 to 27 November, '85 under the auspices of Sangeet Natak Akademi, (Delhi) and West Bengal State Akademi of Dance, Drama, Music & Fine Arts. This festival is part of a scheme sponsored by the Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi, to assist and encourage creative experimental theatre work among the theatre-working youth of different states of India. The five participating plays were *Nongda Apam Thoiba* (The Panthoibi Natya Mandir, Manipur), *Garvabati Janani* (Navanna, Calcutta), *Luit Kanya* (Assam Repertory Theatre, Assam) *Muktipath* (Anwesana, Orissa) and *Pank* (Prantik,

Baharampur). Among them, *Nongda Apam Thoiba* and *Muktipath* have been selected for the New Delhi presentation. Celebrities such as Nagbhushan Sharma, Kanhailal, Bharat Ratna Bhargava and Dhiren Dash were among those who came to attend the festival. The Sansthan had the opportunity to interview Kanhailal, Satish Anand and Dhiren Dash for its archives.

#### BOMBAY

Renowned dramatist and screenplay writer Madhusudan Kalelkar died on 17 December 1985 at Bombay. He has to his credit twenty-five plays based mainly on social themes. He wrote the screenplay of hit films like *Geet gata chal*, *Anurag* and *Dulhan wohi jo piya man bhaye*. Among his Marathi films *Pahu re kiti wat* and *Ammu jato ammuchya Gava* are worth mention. He is also famed for his excellent lyrics.

#### PUNE

Theatre Akademy, Pune, organized a week-long series of seminars on dramaturgy (play-writing and play-direction) at the Tilak Smarak Mandira from 9 to 14 December '85. Mahesh Elkunchwar, Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad spoke on play-writing whereas Jabbar Patel, Vijaya Mehta and Amol Palekar spoke on direction.

The latest issue of *Rangbhumi-Chitrapati diary*—containing names and addresses of Marathi theatre and film organizations and personalities—edited by Satyaban Tetambe has been published recently. According to Dr Shriram Lagoo, the diary is a must for every drama and film lover.

## THEATRE IN TOWN : THIS MONTH

Arabdhya Natya Vidyalyaya — Raktakarabi  
( 26 morn, AFA )

Ashirbad — Ratna Deep ( 18 RS )

Bhumika — Kamala ( 29 AFA )

Bohurupee — Galileo ( 23 AFA ) Rajdarshan( 26 AFA )

Charbak — ( 1 AFA )

Chenamukh — Aagshuddhi ( 31 AFA )

Chetana — Roshan ( 7 & 28 AFA )

Gandhar — Kumar Sambhav ( 9 SM )

Nandikar — Mananiya Bicharak Mandali  
( 2 & 8 AFA )

Natyakarer Sandhane Chhati  
Charitra ( 17 RS )

New Theatre Group — Gabbu Khela  
( 8 SM )

PLT — Maha Bidroha ( 9 RS )

Pancham Vaidik — Nathbati Anathbat  
( 23 morn, AFA )

Pratikriti — Birsha Munda ( 7 SM )

Sayak — Gyan Briksher Phal ( 10 SM )

Sudrak — ( 21 & 25 AFA )

Sundaram — Sajano Bagan ( 8 RS )

Theatre Camp — Bāgher Daak ( 3 RS )

Theatre Centre — Bhasan ( 29 RS )

Theatre Commune — Maha Mash Taila  
( 6 & 22 AFA )

If not otherwise specified the programmes will be held in the evening. It is advisable however to check at the booking office for changes in the programme.

Abbreviations : AFA — Academy of Fine Arts, Cathedral Road-16 ; KM — Kala Mandir, 48, Shakespeare Sarani-17 ; RS — Rabindra Sadan, Acharya Jagadish Ch. Bose Road-20 ; SM — Sisir Manch — Acharya Jagadish Ch. Bose Road-20 ; UI — University Institute, Bankim Chatterji St.-12





# RANGVARTĀ

News Bulletin of the Natya Shodh Sansthan, Calcutta

NUMBER 2 FEBRUARY 1986

The National Festival of Plays, two years old in 1986 and established already as perhaps the most exciting and challenging project improvised by the Sangeet Natak Akademy ever for new and young theatre in India, showed up the seams quite glaringly this time, both at the regional level and the national. With its emphasis on the utilization/exploitation of traditional and folk forms, it seems to have led several young directors and groups to gratuitous flirtation with these forms as a device to claim much needed financial support from the authorities in Delhi. Most of the works that came up at the festivals were either hybrids or celebrations of folk spectacle with little creative use of theatric imagination. There were the shameful cases when metropolitan directors using traditional artistes in an alien setting and a cumbrous situation exposed the latter to derisive booing from an urban audience that could not find any justification for their appearance and role in a play which belonged to a different style altogether. In a discussion held at Delhi this time aimed at an assessment of the project, one of the protagonists of the cult of the revival of folk theatre acknow-

ledged in the heat of the debate that the folk tradition was primarily non-verbal; and it was quite obvious that there is a strategy behind the idealization of the non-verbal, spectacular, celebratory folk theatre at the cost of the more questioning and critical and rational modern theatre in India. There seems to be behind the glorification of the folk theatre as against the so-called 'Western' theatre a deliberate endeavour to scuttle the theatric articulation of problems and the tradition of critique that have come to define the serious new theatre in India at its best. A developing country, struggling with problems and struggling to throw off the horrible burden of colonial deprivation, needs a theatre of radical critique, and does not afford the luxury of a theatre of entertainment and naivete, that ultimately serves to gratify the bored, affluent metropolitan in his complacency with a situation that assures him his creature comforts at the cost of the suffering of the exploited. Whatever aesthetic credit may be formally granted to the authentic folk performances, they do not have a real appeal to the metropolitan audience which only feels its own superiority as it patronizes the naivete and crudity and naturalness of the folk performers. At yet another level, the transplantation and the

necessary packaging for the purpose of the presentation of these as 'shows' have already imposed their own demands on these forms and have progressively served to corrupt and distort them and in the process turned them into entertainment for the urban audiences and a First World which would still like the Third to stay where it has been for ages and remain content there. The India Festivals have been quite a shameful exercise in offering ourselves to the First World in the terms in which it would accept us in their benevolence. The National Festival of Plays should not go that way. It is time to retrieve it and give it a direction that would support and promote independent creativity in several modes at the same time and discover the new directors for the Indian theatre of the future. It was heartening to find during the discussions hosted by the Akademi itself at Delhi this time several voices raised for a really new and totally free theatre.

S. B.

## THEATRE THINKING

### RAMLILA

The Turks invaded India around 1202 A. D. and ravaged and reigned over it for a long period. They imposed their religion and culture on the local Indians. They were not keen to preserve or promote the traditional Hindu culture in any way. This resulted in a total socio-cultural void which lasted for nearly two hundred years. The Hindu social thinkers were worried and thought a way out of this void. Our great epics—the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*—were translated in different regional languages to reach the rural masses who were not familiar with Sanskrit. These adaptations and translations were written in various traditional indigen-

ous forms like the *Kathakata*, *Panchali* etc., to take them to the uneducated masses. Goswami Tulsidas' *Ramcharitmānas*, written around the fifteenth century, is till date the most popular Hindi (Avadhi dialect) adaptation of Valmiki's *Ramayana*. *Ramlila*, the performative form of *Ramcharitmānas* occupies a significant place in the social, religious and cultural environment of Northern India.

Dr Bhanu Shankar Mehta, a pathologist by profession and a keen observer of this traditional art form, had spoken at length about *Ramlila* at a session organized by the Sansthan on 3 October 1982. Dr Mehta's account provided a detailed description of the traditional month-long performance of the *Ramlila* of *Ramnagar*.

*Ramlila* usually begins on the auspicious day of *Ananta-chaturdashi*. Traditionally, the performance should continue for 30 to 31 days depending upon the lunar calendar, but practical considerations have led people at many places to shorten this time-span, though the purist school of Benaras, specially *Ramnagar*, keeps strictly to the tradition. Granting of Ravana's boon takes place on *Dussehra* followed by *Bharatmilāp* on the very next day which marks the end of the *Ramlila* every year.

Speaking of Benaras brings to mind a serious misconception regarding the *Ramlila* of Benaras. Generally, the *Ramlila* of Benaras is often confused with the *Ramlila* of *Ramnagar*. In practice, the *Ramlila* of *Ramnagar* is but a part of the *Ramlila* of Benaras. The Benarasi *Ramlila* can be divided into three parts. The first of the *Ramlilas* was started by Tulsidas himself at the *Asi-ghat* on the bank of the Ganga in *Kedar-khand* (a section of the city of Benaras named after Lord Kedar). A *lila* started nearly simul-



A Scene from Ramlila

taneously at the *Chitrakut-Kshetra* (another section of the city) by Meghabhagat Narayandasji who is believed to have been either a disciple or an associate of Tulsidas. And the 150 year old Ramlila of Ramnagar is sponsored by the successive Maharajahs of Ramnagar. Each of these *lilas* follow the *Ramcharitmānas* in the narration but each has its own distinctive style of presentation.

Dr Mehta defines the lila of Ramnagar as *Ghatit-lilā* (a situation where an incident happens). The performative space at Ramnagar is spread over an area of nearly 8 sq. km. and the different episodes of the Ramlila are enacted sequentially at the different places simultaneously keeping to their own time schedule. This makes it different from modern theatre. Moreover, the performer-

spectator participation is very spontaneous here since the people are free to move along with the performers from one place to another as on the occasion of Rama's coronation or at Rama's *barāt* (marriage) procession where the spectators become performers as well. Another unique aspect of the Ramlila is that except the *Swarupas* none rehearses a role. It is the gradual training over the years through attending and seeing the Ramlila that helps the characters to perform their roles.

On the morning of *Anantachaturdashi*, the Maharajah as the principal organizer performs a *yagna* (sacrificial offerings to the god of fire) to usher in the Ramlila season. It is believed that the organizer, the performers and the spectators of Ramlila are blessed by the gods themselves.

Naturany, *Rangamancha* and *Nāṭyamandir* developed in divergent directions.

In the articles published in *Rangamancha* one can notice a balance of serious thinking and idealism. The general position of the maga-

do not find a place on the stage, they fail as plays altogether'.

'Bengali theatre nowadays, following European theatre, has turned into mere money-making machines, so that it now aims not at the development of poetry,

but the illusion of reality from out of a particular text through the use of costumes and scenic design to fascinate the spectators in the manner of a magician. Their intention is to create an optical illusion for the spectators. and add to the income of the theatres'.

3. Different forms of tradition and historical attitudes are identified in ancient Indian dramaturgy and stagecraft as in the studies devoted to the history of Bengali drama and the stage. The parallel studies of European theatre bear traces of the same curiosity.
- 4 In its evaluation of contemporary theatre personalities, it draws attention to Dharmadas Sur and Ardhendushekhar Mustafi, the playwright Ramnarayan Tarkaratna, known for his *Kulinkulusarbaswa*, as also the latter's patron, Kalichandra Roychoudhury.
5. Old and young actresses like Sukumari and Tarasundari are studied with great respect.
6. In the articles of Byomkesh Mustafi, this magazine perhaps tries subtly to follow Ardhendushekhar's position. If *Nātyamandir* is identified with the school of Girish Chandra *Rangamancha* can be identified as an organ of the school of Ardhendushekhar Mustafi.

Only three issues of the magazine are available with us (1317 Bangabada, Sravan, Bhadro, Aswin-Kartik (joint edition) ). We are not even sure whether there were later issues at all. The Bangiya Sahitya Parishad Library (Calcutta) has these issues and Natya Shodh Sansthan has in its collection xerox copies of all the three issues.

DURGA DUTTA

## SANSTHAN ACTIVITIES

A session with Manoj Mitra, this year's recipient of the Akademi Award for play-writing, was held at the NSS hall on 25 January which included playreading followed by a short discussion on the play. Manoj Mitra selected his new play *Naishabhoj* (Nocturnal Feast). Written and directed by him, *Naishabhoj* is to be staged for the first time on 11 February at the Academy of Fine Arts.



Manoj Mitra

Among the audience were Kiranmoy Raha, Shiv Kumar Jhunjhunwala, Kiran Jalan and others.

### Future Activities

Two plays of Shankar Dev, *Ram Vijay* and *Rukmini Haran*, will be performed by Uttar

Kamlabari Satra (Majuli Dweep, Assam) in the traditional folk-form *Bhawana* of Assam on 13 and 14 February at the Maharashtra Niwas Hall.

## THEATRE NEWS

### CALCUTTA

A 22 day long West Bengal Jatra Festival sponsored by the state government was inaugurated at Rabindra Sadan on 10 January, with the aim of popularizing the jatra and promoting humanitarian values through these performances.

Sanskriti Sagar sponsored *Ramlila* produced by Shobha Deepak Singh and the Shriram Bharatiya Kala Kendra, Delhi, at Ghanshyamdas Birla Sabhaghar on 19 January.

Barry John of Delhi was in the city towards the end of this month to select actors-actresses for his Hindi and English productions for the Sangeet Kala Mandir, Calcutta.

Ms Anuradha Kapoor read a paper on the *Ramlila* of Ramnagar at the Second Conference of Subaltern Studies at Calcutta, and touched on its social implications, even as she offered an excellent account of the performance itself and how it defined itself within a traditional system of pre-determined attitudes and roles for the performers and audience alike.

### BOMBAY

The National Centre for Performing Arts and Max Mueller Bhavan in collaboration with L'Alliance Francaise, the British Coun-

cil, the House of Soviet Culture, the USIS, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations and the Sangeet Natak Akademi held an East West Theatre Encounter in Bombay from January 17-25. The productions announced included Vijaya Mehta's *Hayavadan*, Alyque Padamsee's *Request Concert* (with Smita Patil), Pearl Padamsee's *The Measures Taken*, Eugenio Barba's *Moon and Darkness*, *Marriage with God*, *Wait for the Dawn*, *The Romancers of Oedipus and Pupa*, Wolfram Mehring's *The Exception and the Rule*, Fritz Benewitz's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, Lamberto Lamberti's *Peppa e Barra*, Habib Tanvir's *Charandas Chor*, Jabbar Patel's *Ghoshiram Kotwal*, Ratan Thiyam's *Chakravarty* and Shekhar Chatterjee's *Pontu Laha* and *Etotuku Basa*.

### EAST GERMANY

Utpal Dutt and his group (PLT) are back in Calcutta after participating in the Theatre Festival at Berlin. They staged *Mahabidroh* (The Great Revolution) and received excellent reviews throughout the GDR. Mr Dutt delivered the first of a series of annual lectures at the Shri Ram Centre of Art and Culture, New Delhi, on 13-15 January 1986 on 'Indian Theatre : What is to be done ?'





## THEATRE IN TOWN : THIS MONTH

### GROUP THEATRE

- Batayanik - Bisarjan (6 RS)  
 Bhumika—Kamla (1 AFA)  
 Bohurupee—Aguner Pakhi (2, 9, 16, 23, AFA) Rajdarshan.  
 Charbak—Padya Gadya Prabandha (3 AFA) Asal Jinish & Sitar Agnipariksha (19 AFA)  
 Chetana—Marich Sangbad Jagannath & Roshan. (10, 20, 25, AFA)  
 Calcutta Group Theatre—(12 & 16 AFA)  
 Class Theatre—(11 SM)  
 Gandhar—Kumar Sambhab. (18 AFA)  
 Kalhar—(2 SM)  
 Masquerade—Ek Yug (19 AFA)  
 Nandikar—Mananiya Bicharak Mandali (6 & 27 AFA)  
 Padatik—Aadhe Adhurey (H) (2,9,16,23, P)  
 P.L.T.—Ebar Rajar Pala (1 AFA) Barricade (5, AFA) Ajker Shahjahan (21 Mukta-Mancha)  
 Rangkarmee—Purush (H) (13 KMB)  
 Rudraksha—(7 SM)  
 Samakalin Silpi Dal—Tagid (8 AFA)  
 Sangeet Kala Mandir—Bhabhi Ka Vivah (H) (2, 8, 23, KMB)  
 Sudrak—Amitakshar (13 AFA)  
 Sundaram - Naishabhoj (11 AFA)  
 Theatre Commune—Mahamastaila (5 & 20, AFA)  
 Theatre Workshop (21 AFA) Narak Gulzar  
 Unity Theatre—(10 SM)

### PROFESSIONAL THEATRE

1. Bijan Theatre ( 5A Raja Raj Kr. St-5 )—Bilkis Begum (Thurs, Sat, Sun).
2. Biswaroopa Theatre ( 2A Raja Raj Kr. St-6 )—Swaralipi (Thurs, Sat, Sun)
3. Circarina—Kane Bibhrat (Thurs, Sat, Sun)
4. Minerva Theatre (6 Beadon St-6)—Cancer (Thurs, Sat, Sun)
5. Pratap Mancha (Acharya Prafulla Ch. Road)—Lialia (Thurs, Sun)
6. Rangana ( 153/2A Acharya Prafulla Ch. Road-6 ) — Sundari Lo Sundari (Thurs, Sat, Sun)
7. Rangmahal—Ashlil (Thurs, Sat & Sun)
8. Star Theatre (79/3/4 Bidhan Sarani-6)—Pasher Bari (Tue, Wed, Fri) Samadhan (Thurs) Shapmochan (Sat & Sun)
9. Tapan Theatre ( 37A-B, Sadananda Rd-26)—Nagpash (Thurs, Sat, Sun)

If not otherwise specified the programmes will be held in the evening. It is advisable however to check at the booking office for changes in the programme.

Abbreviation : AFA—Academy of Fine Arts, Cathedral Road-16 ; P — Padatik Little Theatre, 6/7, Acharya Jagdish Ch. Bose Rd-20; KM—Kala Mandir, 48 Shakespeare Sarani-17 ; KMB—Kala Mandir Basement, 48 Shakespeare Sarani-17, RS — Rabindra Sadan, Acharya Jagdish Ch. Bose Road-20 ; SM—Sisir Manch, Acharya Jagdish Ch Bose Rd-20, UI—University Institute, Bankim Chatterjee Street-12.